

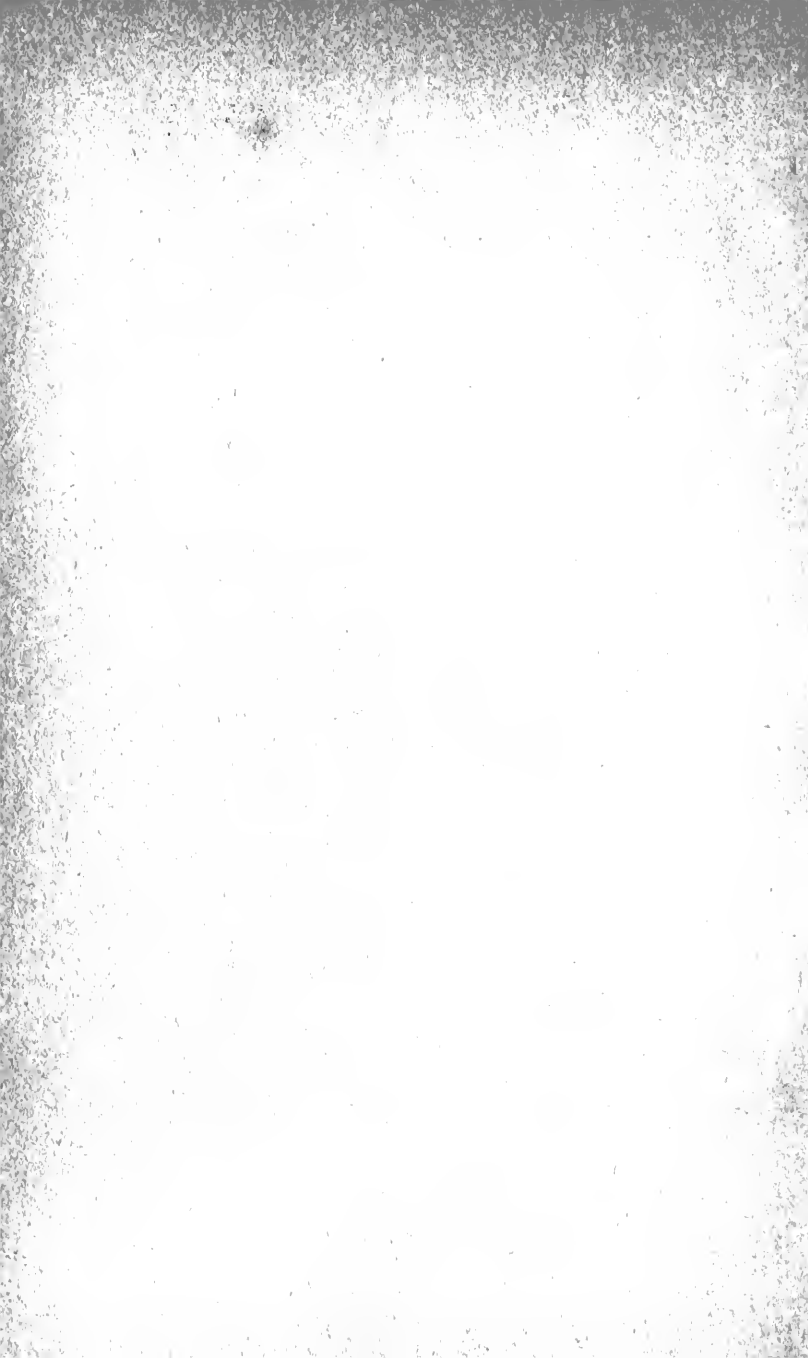
Ibsen on his Merits

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IBSEN ON HIS MERITS.



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BY

SIR EDWARD R. RUSSELL

AND

PERCY CROSS STANDING.

“I have boldly dared to plan
The re-fashioning of Man.”

LONDON: CHAPMAN & HALL, LD.

1897.



PREFATORY.



THE "excuse" for this volume is partly to be found in the recently revived interest of English people in the vogue of Ibsen; and partly in the fact that, with the exception of Mr. Bernard Shaw, practically no one in this country has had courage or encouragement sufficient to issue in permanent form any lengthy appreciation or criticism of Dr. Ibsen's works. A portion of Sir Edward Russell's contribution was originally delivered in the form of a public lecture, but is now carefully revised and brought up to date. Much has been said and written for and against the Ibsen

formula; and if the present writers have occasionally delivered themselves in terms of almost unrestrained enthusiasm, they have not done so without having first sought to reconcile the unqualified condemnation of some critics with the facts as they are. It will be observed that the concluding chapter, dealing with the play of *John Gabriel Borkman*, is jointly written.

PART I.

BY

SIR EDWARD RUSSELL.

IBSEN ON HIS MERITS.

IF the contributions of human spirits to each other's enlightenment and delight are to fructify to the utmost, it is much more important for critics to recognize the merits than to signalize the defects of great authors. And when a high place has been conquered in letters or art, there are few critics who are entitled to pronounce positively against the work by which such a position has been attained. You would not suppose this from much that you read. Nothing is easier than to dispose of the claims of a new great man. Shakespeare, Beethoven, Garrick, Darwin, Wagner, Whitman, and many others have with great facility been shown to be worthy

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of extinction; but somehow they have not gone out. Ibsen will not go out either.

In what I shall try to say about him I shall try to appreciate rather than depreciate. It is a significant benevolence of language that "appreciate" in its transitive sense means to appraise with some degree of gusto. I shall hope to assist you in admiring Ibsen, without exaggerating what is good and great in his works—without even ignoring his defects or faults. Whatever else Ibsen is, he certainly is not perfect.

But by what standard are we to judge him? He is a playwright. All his plays—even the unlikeliest—have been acted. Yet among us several must be considered unactable, and none are truly popular. As a beginning we must recognize that British taste, or even British classification of plays unsuitable for representation, is not of absolute authority. For this man has caught

the ear of Europe ; has created moot points of discussion which are likely enough to endure for generations ; has completely revolutionized in important respects the tone and the licence of our most serious and most successful plays ; has so profoundly affected the conscience of society, that many persons consider him a prophet rather than a dramaturge. Some will say that this is conclusive against him as a producer of art ; but it is nothing against him as a great phenomenon.

When the Senate of University College did me the honour to ask me to lecture before them, they suggested that I should choose some subject of dramatic literature. So kindly a recognition of my own studies came to me in the light of a command, and I at once conceived a desire to furnish an estimate of a writer for the stage of our own time, who, though he is not perhaps ill understood in the general character of his

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work, cannot be said to have been rightly measured or placed by the English public.

Ibsen has against him almost the whole theatrical profession. A few enthusiasts such as Miss Robins, Miss Marion Lea, Mr. Waring, Miss Achurch, and Mr. Charrington have yielded absolutely to his peculiar charm. On the other hand, Mr. Louis Calvert, I see, "has no enthusiasm for Ibsen," who in his opinion "tends to diminish the public stock of harmless pleasure." I can only say that was not the effect upon me when I saw Mr. Calvert's performance of "Rosmersholm." But, as a rule, actors detest what they consider morbid. Their demand is for what they call happy, healthy, wholesome work. They always adored Dickens; they loathed to see Thackeray come into a theatre. Histrionic exactions, if they could be gratified, would have a constant supply of thoroughly pleasant, while at the same time

thoroughly able, ingenious, and original plays. Anything morbid actors would far rather have treated in the way of comedy than seriously. Ibsen's comedy has very little fun in it. It is saturnine. His serious work is immensely serious. It plunges with little notice into terrible psychological and physiological realities.

To go about to decide how far a great man is a product of his time, or how far a time is the product of its great men, is rather idle occupation. But it can hardly be thought unnatural that in a period such as ours the simpler themes should seem to be exhausted, should fail to stimulate invention; or that more complex and twisted circumstances of life should invite genius to exploit them. Such ideas as evolution and heredity, greater intellectual and even physical sanctity in human relationships, more binding and, so to speak, impersonal personal obligations to public spirit and

public duty, cannot come into vogue among cultured mankind without giving the observant much to observe and the imaginative much to imagine. Even beyond these conceptions, which may be said to cover the newest requirements of individual and municipal life, there may come into view, ushered in by fancy, strange and high-flying ideals. It is a peculiarity of some forms of genius to become fatigued by the commonplace—to find even the newest lights on common duty dull and wearying; and this very fatigue yields to such genius springs of venturesome speculation in regions yet untrodden by human experience. If this is possible at any time, and probable in such a time as ours, it cannot be held abnormal that a great diagnoser of modern moral disease, a great seer of the tendencies of mankind in a world so considerably changed in aspect by modern ideas, should produce works of imagination which those

who attach special conventional meanings to the words should not consider "happy, healthy, and wholesome." Such works may, however, be wholesome, though the characters in them may not be wholesome. They may promote happiness and health, though they do not represent happiness and health. The story of the Prodigal Son is not a pleasant one till the last scenes, and even then there is a jarring note in the elder brother. There is a word in it so coarse that it would scarcely now be permitted in a leading article. I should receive a number of letters telling me that newspapers must lie about, and that Miss Podsnap might see them. But the story of the Prodigal is salutary. It has warned many a lad against profligacy; it has drawn many a profligate back to purity. We may not expect the serenity of such a Gospel parable in the creations of a dramatist who as yet is not persuaded that the good in

the world has much chance of conquering the evil; but the sternness of this moralist may be necessary to make us understand new and old disorders, and by contrast he illustrates in several of his characters a nobility and poetry of goodness which have been raised to the highest power by communion with the subtle spirit of this age.

We may say all this and more, and yet not have begun to criticize Ibsen as a playwright. Indeed, the question of standard is apt to be embarrassing. One person says, "What does it teach?" Another says, "If it purposely teaches anything it is all wrong in art." One cries, "What is his message?" Another cries, "If he has any message at all he is no dramatist." Now Ibsen always has a message, though different people may read it differently; and he is always a dramatist, though often crude and provincial and juvenile in his methods. The best thing we can do in

such cases is to eschew canons and recognize facts. Ibsen's art is chiefly power. His secret is chiefly grip. He is the more notable, therefore, as an effective dramatist, because he is independent of the construction, the probability, the polish, the dialogue of playwrights more expert in the niceties of their craft. The experience of most people is that they begin to read or see a play of Ibsen with curiosity; that they presently smile at its puerilities; that they expect to be bored by his *dramatis personæ*; that as they advance they wonder how so provincial a man could ever get so European a reputation; but that suddenly, just as they are going to yawn, they are as it were struck to the very centre by some strong, penetrating, pregnant suggestion of character or problem which seems to curdle the sensibilities. From that moment the author has them at his mercy. His grip never relaxes until his design is worked

out. His faults and awkwardnesses matter not. The reader or spectator submits to the Ibsen spell.

I am often asked if the plays act well. So far as I know, surprisingly well. I have seen only three—*A Doll's House*, *Hedda Gabler*, and *Rosmersholm*. I had read each of them before seeing them—"a thing I do not hold with," as Arthur Sketchley's Mrs. Brown used to say. Yet I found the action freshly and unexpectedly engrossing; the dialogue astonishingly piquant, considering that it was essentially colloquial and ordinary; and, as far as I could judge, the sudden passages where the grip comes must have been as startling and remorseless in their seizure of the first-time auditor as I had found them in reading, and now found them again upon the stage. I long to see *Ghosts*, and *The Wild Duck*, and *The Master - Builder*, as crucial examples of

Ibsen's peculiar power of surmounting, perhaps mounting by, his own deficiencies, which is, taken along with all the circumstances, the most curious phenomenon of dramaturgy which has come under my observation.

He never minds the laugh being against himself. In this he stands absolutely alone among dramatists. The first thing a playwright learns after he gets his start is to *be* a playwright—that is, to be a craftsman whom no one will make ashamed. He winces as he writes at the thought of any of his characters saying or doing anything which will provoke the stage manager, or the actors, or a sniffing critic, or a shrewd man in the pit or gallery to ridicule or sneer, or the lifting of the eyebrows of contempt. There is indeed one popular and powerful dramatist of our own stage who has a little of the awkward youth which we perceive

perpetually in Ibsen, and which Ibsen will never grow out of. I mean Mr. Henry Arthur Jones; and in this respect the best of his play-writing is a remarkable contrast to the always adult work of Mr. Pinero. But if Mr. Jones is young, Ibsen is infantile. Yet Ibsen's aims and ideas are more searching and far-reaching than those of either of these authors, and but for Ibsen the most striking of their dramas would never have been conceived.

Let me lead you up—or down—to one instance of this strange and unexampled flaw, which must be considered to belong to his genius, because inseparable from it and characteristic of the man, though seemingly the reverse of contributory to anything great and valuable which his genius produces. The story of Hedda Gabler is a peculiar one even for Ibsen. She is the newly married wife, aged twenty-nine,

of a zealous, ambitious, good-natured professor, who thinks himself most fortunate in having won her, but expects nothing particular to happen ; is as towards women and the feminine nature quite shallow and casual and honest ; fresh and pleasant and interesting within his limits ; the very man to be easily happy with a healthy, agreeable, and ordinarily intelligent wife ; not at all likely to be very much occupied by her, or to notice anything peculiar in her, unless it is forced upon him. He assumes that she *will* be healthy, agreeable, intelligent, and hospitable, and keeps his eyes alertly on his professional work, even during their honeymoon. In this particular case the play begins, not ill and clumsily, but well and with great art. The arrival of the young couple at their home, the characters of the professor's aunt and old servant, the non-accommodation of the wife to her new surroundings, and the fussy content of the

husband, who is wholly without misgivings, are sketched with vivid skill. As a matter of fact, the good homely young man of letters might as well have brought Cleopatra home. Hedda, dignified and distinguished, of pallid beauty, with steel-grey eyes having a cold open expression of serenity, the hair an agreeable brown of medium tint, but not very thick—for Ibsen never leaves you in doubt on points of personality—is an incarnation of reckless selfish ambition, and of an insatiable appetite for a fascinating mastery over a certain type of men. To this type her husband does not belong. She has married “because she had danced till she was tired,” and because she counts on show and position. In the ordinary sense she is not a woman of passion. Ibsen’s women seldom are in that signification passionate; and, indeed, most of his men take their love rather quietly, and are either commonplace (as Tesman) or exhausted

volcanoes (as Judge Brack and Dr. Rank), or beings whom it is difficult to ignite except with very peculiar fire (as Rosmersholm). If one may judge from Ibsen, drink, literature, wastrelism, and eccentric ideals have a great deal more to do with masculine adventures in Scandinavia than have the desires and fancies which, in the rest of Europe, produce most of the life-dramas; while ideals, pure and simple, are the motive power of dramatic conduct among good and bad Norse women alike. There is usually in Ibsen's plays some symbol—such as the home and social life which Tesman and Hedda have dreamed of—to typify, by allusions to it under various aspects of the action, the moral situation; and there is often a ne'er-do-well—usually a man of real ability gone wrong—to preach or point a moral. In *Hedda Gabler* the ne'er-do-well has begun to do well again, but a fine

situation is created by his being a competitor with Hedda's husband for fame and place, being also a lover of hers in former days, and now in comradeship with another woman who worships and is saving him by keeping him off drink. It is Hedda's aim to have courage "to live her life"—caring not at all that her life should be good, and true, and humane. By her mastery over Lövborg, the weak though brilliant rival of her husband in literature, she pushes him back into alcohol and disgrace, and by contrivance obtains the manuscript of the book which is to crown his fame, and burns it before the audience in a stove. The drama is thus advancing to a truly remarkable *dénouement*. Hedda Tesman, finding that after all her whimsical villainy is not prospering quite according to her peculiar mind, resolves to shoot herself behind a curtain. This is not in any way announced

beforehand, though she has toyed with pistols, but, Lövborg having shot himself, she praises him for "having had the courage to do what had to be done." She regards this as an act of voluntary courage, which she is glad to find still possible in the world—"something over which there falls a veil of unintentional beauty." "Force and will enough to break away from the banquet of life—so early" is, in her judgment, admirable and enviable. Her ideal fails her afterwards, because the man has shot himself in a scene of ill-resort, and in the abdomen instead of in the breast. "Oh, what a curse of ridicule and vulgarity hangs over everything if only she touches it!" The crisis arrives when it becomes known to her that it was with her pistol, suggestively lent to him by her, that Lövborg shot himself, and that Judge Brack, who had been forcing an intimate friendship on her, holds this fact *in terrorem*

over her. Then after various touches of keen comedy aimed at each of the personages in the domestic scene, she passes behind a curtain, and even in the act of lightly conversing with the others, "lives her life," as she would say, by ending it. The fatal shot is heard; her innocent husband exclaims, after his manner, that she is playing with her father's pistols again; the catastrophe is discovered; Hedda lies dead; the *roué* judge, who has been carrying on a sort of toy-temptation with her, sinks half fainting in a chair. "May God take pity on us!" he cries. "People don't do such things."

Whether they "do such things" or not, the picture presented throughout this most dramatic play of a home perverted from its happiness and innocence by wild vagaries of diseased individualism is most powerfully conceived and is of intensely true moral application in many ways, as

might easily be shown were citation possible. I know of nothing stronger or truer in its essentials to life. But with a careless indifference to the right choice of expedients, which, if Ibsen were not an old and practised hand we should have to call juvenile awkwardness, the great shock which ends the play is preceded by the wholly unnecessary absurdity of Hedda's husband and Lövborg's lady-comrade sitting down suddenly with the notes of Lövborg's destroyed work, and beginning then and there before the audience to reproduce it. This seems absurd in the telling; it is absolutely ludicrous in the acting; and might quite easily have been avoided. Excellent and poignant effects are made by Tesman and Mrs. Elvsted being engaged together in reference to the book. They might even be glancing at and sampling the materials which Mrs. Elvsted has preserved. But to actually

go to work at a moment's notice upon a literary task which is to last them months is to risk by a needless absurdity the whole force of the climax of the play.

Ibsen's work abounds in such absurdities and lends itself to burlesque. One only has to pass into a Philistine mood, and, without being much of a wit, one may extract from these plays plenty of rough amusement. Admirers of Ibsen should take quite kindly all parodies and caricatures of the master. Mr. Anstey's humorous versions of several of the plays may be read by those who appreciate Ibsen with a frank enjoyment proportioned to their appreciation of the great dramatist's power. They know that, though shallow critics may, after their kind, fasten on improbabilities and careless eccentricities as if these were the main features of Ibsen's work, the electric hold that he gains upon all who read or see his plays is all the stronger

proof of his greatness because of the phenomenal drawbacks which his utter indifference to minor likelihood has encumbered him withal.

Nor is it always minor unlikelihood only by which Ibsen is handicapped. Essential, pervading, substantial improbability is upon occasion braved with a courage as unfaltering or an indifference as profound. Nothing can give dramatic work an air of greater unreality—nothing may be expected so decidedly to alienate the average playgoer—as such a crude mixture of the real and the symbolical as is to be found in *The Master-Builder*. You never know how much of it you must take for parable; how much for frenzied hyperbole utterly out of place, according to ordinary canons, in a presentation of real life; how much—if any—for emblem of some unstated moral condition. Yet I confess that this *Master-Builder* obtained

over me a mastery which seemed to be that of exuberant moral power; and I have had testimony from persons wholly devoid of literary, much less of Ibsen predilection, that in seeing the piece wholly without preparation or anticipation they have been grasped as in a vice. One man said to me, as I have stated publicly before, "I felt while seeing *The Master-Builder* as if every mean thing or thought I had ever been guilty of was being bitterly summoned to my memory."

Now, this is no praise of a play in the estimation of such a critic as now sits in the seat of the great John Oxenford of the *Times*. An amusing piece of well-managed nonsense was lately produced in London, and the leading journal congratulated the management not only on having produced an entertaining farcical comedy, but on having restored the stage to its proper function. I don't know how far I shall

carry the reader with me, but I am of opinion that frivolous amusement has of late made most undesirable encroachments, not only on the stage, but in many other departments.

There is no probability of plays of the Ibsen type becoming too numerous. Few can write them ; few care to see them ; it must be admitted that their subjects are morbid, and that if they pretended to "see life whole" their point of view would be pessimistic. But the morbid element in life is far-reaching ; is productive in life of the most dramatic events ; enters consciously or unconsciously into much human experience ; is subtly connected in all but those whose sanity is least sensitive with many of our keenest and most prevalent feelings ; is liable greatly to affect us in the dearest and closest relations ; is amenable very considerably to the will when properly understood ; and is, therefore, well worthy of

being to a certain extent studied, whether as a mere field of intelligent investigation or as a stimulus and corrective of the moral consciousness.

Upon many the result of reading or seeing Ibsen is the awakening of conscience by the contemplation of morbid mental anatomy. And morbid mental anatomy, as he with a strange fascination displays it, is related in turn to various obligations of mind and body, of domestic, social, civic, patriotic, and spiritual bearings, all of vast importance to individual and social life.

I am not prepared to discuss whether it is permissible for Art to use morbid anatomy or physiology thus. I move the previous question: If the art is great, should it be challenged? For my part I demur to canons, whether reasoned or arbitrary, which would reject or exclude any great product of imagination or insight.

The Master-Builder is an architect—

provincial and middle class, as Ibsen's characters usually are—who is engaged in the building business. For reasons of the drama the author has combined, with Halvard Solness's remarkable ambition and success in his calling, a mystical aim which has at length taken form in certain designs for the creation of perfect homes and a project for the erection of a gigantic tower. The confident and careless manipulation of this curious compost of reality and transcendental, heady intention is among the most childish work—probably the most childish—that Ibsen has ever done; but it is associated with and is the mere frame and canvas for a rare picture of selfish irresponsibility. This worthy, commonplace, provincial architect, Solness, becomes the type of a character abundant enough, it is to be feared; one wholly given up to the interests and the fancies of self, and a prey to any delusion or deluder that can

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intoxicate his personality; but possessing also a remarkable appropriating fascination over others. He comes under the power of others and exercises power over others—in this particular being much more real than the autocratic and melodramatic personages, such as George Eliot's Grandcourt, who usually rule the roast in fiction. The rise and progress of a junior architect depraves by jealousy and dishonest self-preservation Solness's mind, which once was noble and generous. His neglect and hoodwinking of a good wife reveals the callousness which egotism has grown in him. His duplicity and sensuousness in dealing with a young female relative, who is his clerk, are all the baser because he accommodates them to his interests and subordinates them to the wild and wayward influence gained over him by the eccentric heroine of the play. This is a young woman named Hilda Wangel, previously known to students of

the plays, having been seen as quite a girl in *The Lady from the Sea*. There she exhibited a precocious appetite for what is "thrilling," and got into her head a fancy which becomes the catchword of the later play. In *The Master-Builder* it becomes evident that this fancy has grown with her growth and strengthened with her strength—which is now, in spite of her flightiness, considerable. Entering the domestic circle of the Solnesses, fascinating the wife and fascinating the husband, who in a casual way, thinking nothing about it, had fascinated her when she was little more than a child, and created in her the fancy key-note of which I have spoken, she at once dominates the interior, though guilty of the absurdest vagaries—perhaps because of them; feeds full and at the same time piques and titillates the vanity, the enjoying faculty, the vein of unscrupulousness and the wild ambition of the Master-

Builder, whose moral sanity is entirely gone, and brings about an actual tragic crisis when, climbing to the summit of his Babel-tower, he reels and is precipitated headlong to the earth.

The meaning of all this is surely clear enough. I neither insist upon the possibility of the incidents nor attempt to transmute them into allegory. I let myself go with the author, and I think I see pretty well all he wishes me to see, and find it powerful, absorbing, typical of whole regions of human life. I admit that Ibsen might have told the same grim, wayward, moral story in terms of actual life. I allow that a dramatist takes a great risk if he does not restrict himself to things that might happen—not necessarily in his collocation of them, but being possible separate occurrences, permissible for him to combine and to heighten for stage purposes by language and action, and to elucidate by soliloquy.

In the modifications of reality which are thus made for dramatic purposes, the playwright must feel in advance the pulse of his audience, and may extend very indefinitely the limits of the supposed possible. But if he disregards the element of possibility of incident, and hovers between the purely fanciful and the seemingly emblematic, he must face extraordinary difficulties. It is well that Ibsen faced these difficulties, and he has surmounted them. The ethical effect of *The Master-Builder* is far greater than would have been the effect of the plot and characters if they had been more prosaically settled and moulded into forms of probable and consistent incident.

And besides this there may become apparent to one in reading this play something of the method in which Ibsen works. My suggestion is that, setting out with an intention to make his play collectively didactic,

he leaves to chance and fancy whether he is didactic in passing; that he scorns the idea of concrete probability so long as his moral abstractions and physiological perceivings are true; and that in writing he gets into a condition of exaltation, the work done in which would be revised out of existence, or into comparative insipidity, by a more timid or fastidious author, but is left by him untouched when once it has passed from his brain to paper.

Self always bulks largely in Ibsen's work—not the dramatist's self—but the selves of his characters. It is as introspective as Carlyle desired that we all should not be. Another instance of this peculiarity is *Peer Gynt*, which, though a poem, is a more vulgar *Master-Builder*. *Peer Gynt* has, I believe, been acted both lately and twenty years ago, and Grieg supplied music for a recent representation. Presumably, however, it was not written for the stage.

It sets out from an atmosphere of Scandinavian folk-lore; and returns at its close pretty nearly to the same surroundings. I have no knowledge of the original, to enable me to judge of the composition as a poem, but my instinct is that the translation by the Messrs. Archer gives a fair idea of it. Another of my disqualifications is—if I may trouble you with my personal equation—that I am constitutionally incapable of greatly enjoying folk-lore for its own sake or when it yields succulence only from a husk of crude narrative, which may or may not be symbolical. Ibsen is said to have obtained the local colour of *Peer Gynt* and *Brand*, when commissioned by the Norwegian Government to collect songs and legends at Romsdal and Söndmøre. The results are not attractive to me. But the translators suggest that “the sheer interest, the pure poetry of the thing,”

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should carry the reader past all obscurities, and that the poem should "bite upon the mind." Its right to be accounted as "upon the summits of literature" consists, they say, in its "meaning so much more than the poet consciously intended." "One of the characteristics of a masterpiece," they add, is "that every one can read into it his own secret." This privilege of the masterpiece has certainly been pushed to an extreme in *Peer Gynt*, but I admit that the work does carry even an unsympathetic reader along, and that the secret I read into it—if I read any secret into it—is the fatuity and criminality of self-delusion when it takes the form of opinionative, unscrupulous self-indulgence. *Peer Gynt*, though he begins as the companion of trolls, and involves himself half in truth, half in brag, with all sorts of weird Norwegian legendry, careers through the world in the subsequent tableaux of his life with the manners of

a bagman and the morals of a charlatan ; making money by commercial immoralities, accepting any other immoralities that turn up for his delectation, evading the truth about himself with consummate Philistine audacity, committing the most base cruelties without a suspicion of remorse for absolutely selfish reasons, but all the time imagining that he is in some special degree a favourite of Heaven, and that there will be something very wrong if at last he is not as fortunate with the Judge of all the earth as he has been in all the wild transactions of his life. His catchword is that a man should be himself. Throughout the action this is a mere synonym for indulging himself. The scenes—unlinked by consecutive story—where they have apparent meaning are a study of ill-educated, undisciplined, optimist egotism. So understood, the crude drama hits hard at foibles that lie deep in many characters, as well

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as floating on the surface, but one can scarcely help feeling that the effect would have been greater if the work had been more coherent. There is a half-comic, half-sensuous episode in which Peer Gynt, in the most flagrant disguise of transparent imposture, figures as an Oriental prophet, and attaches to himself, or attaches himself to, a sly desert maiden, who eventually runs off with his valuables and leaves him stranded in a Sahara. There is a serious episode in which a priest delivers a very original funeral sermon on a man who as a boy chopped a finger off in order to escape conscription :—

“No patriot was he. Both for Church and State
A fruitless tree. But there on the upland ridge,
In the small circle where he saw his calling,
There he was great because he was himself.
His inborn note rang true unto the end.
His days were as a lute with muted strings.
And, therefore, peace be with thee, silent warrior,
That fought the peasant's little fight, and fell.

It is not ours to search the heart and reins,
That is no task for dust, but for its ruler.
Yet dare I freely, firmly speak my hope,
He scarce stands crippled now before his God."

But this passage is every way far above almost everything else in *Peer Gynt*.

There is much talk of the vigour and earnestness that go to a sin. There is much discussion and illustration—all whimsical—of what it is to be yourself, a topic full in its essence, in *Peer Gynt's* opinion, of edification. There are absolutely inane colloquies designed to bring out *Peer Gynt's* self-sufficient, empty character, but sinking for the purpose to a very poor literary level. There is a coarse and frolicsome comparison of a philosopher to a tom-cat. There is a really striking and Carlylean simile of an onion—all swathings and no centre—as an illustration of how the central core of some human character eludes the search

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—ending with the sardonic comment, "Nature is witty." After a series of ill-conducted repetitions of a feeble spiritual conundrum, in the solution of which Peer Gynt is to find a respite from death, the end comes in a piece of curiously meaningless sentiment, a woman to whom he has never been properly attached revealing to him that he has always been "himself, the whole man, the true man" "in her faith, in her hope, and in her love." Obviously this is no answer to any question that Peer Gynt's *bizarre* career may have raised. But the production is in no sense one to be dealt with seriously as a concatenation or as a whole. It has interesting and even telling moments. It has humour, though very clumsy humour. It is strongly saved from the aimlessness of mere whim by the uncompromising presentation in many phases of an unscrupulous vulgarian with a feeble turn

for self-introspection. But there is no real problem, no real answer, no real theorem, no real thesis, no refined excellence. I cannot allow that *Peer Gynt* is on the summits of literature at all.

Brand—Ibsen's other dramatic poem—is a very different matter. This is serious, without any attempt at humour. The metre in the original Norwegian is noble. The diction is eloquent. The action is impressive. Here we are among ideals, and all other ideals bow down before one which is supreme—the ideal of self-surrender, for which the motto or catchword is, “All or nothing.” We have no reason to conclude that this is the poet's personal ideal in ethics or religion. At all events, I hold it to be an indefensible one. There is no virtue in self-renunciation *per se*. Martyrdom must sometimes be obligatory, but there is no reason why martyrs should be life-

long anchorites or self-torturers. The martyr-spirit, when called forth by exigencies of duty, is sublime in itself. But it is a matter of course to the true martyr. If martyrdom were cultivated for its own sake, or even as the one essential thing to be sought for the good of others, it would become a mere morbid will-worship. A constant insistence upon self-surrender as essential to please God is, however, an ideal capable of creating a great story if not a great drama. Ibsen has so treated it that, whether renunciation is a good ideal or not, its exemplar Brand is an immortal creation. Sombre, stern, forbidding, unsympathetic; but true with a cruel truth to the rigid and frigid doctrine to which his whole being is pledged. The subject is pursued with most pathetic details.

In much that is called pessimism in Ibsen he does well to be angry. His

feeling is indignation at the unsatisfactoriness of human motives and conduct. The average "wholesome" playwright—as he is called—concentrates the villainy or the unsatisfactoriness in one or two characters, and flatters humanity in the others by exhibiting a number of personages well-meaning and on the whole not repugnant. This method rises in the greatest poets and creators into very high regions of excellence. It is the way of Shakespeare, of Cervantes, of Goethe, of Scott, of Dickens, of George Eliot, of Bulwer, and of Charles Reade. It is not the way of Ibsen. He is for laying bare and abrading the weakness and errors of all, and administers scarifying treatment to foibles as well as to vices.

I have said how largely self is examined and probed in his works. Here is a searching and scathing passage from *Brand*, in which what I may call the selfishness of many ordinary people, grimly and

awkwardly caricatured in *Peer Gynt*, is solemnly chidden—

“Joy makes flaw in no breast. Grant that you *are* a slave to mirth, only be one from one day’s end to another. Do not be one thing one day or one year, and something else the next. Whatever you are, be that wholly and entirely, and not by bits, piecemeal. The Bacchant is a distinct idea ; a toper its failure. Silenus is a picturesque figure ; a drunkard his caricature. Only go about this country and observe each man, and you will see that every one has learnt to be a little of everything. He retains a little veil of seriousness for Sunday use, a little adherence to the customs of his fathers, a little pruriency after supper—for *that* was the same with his fathers—a little warm-heartedness when there is merry-making, and he hears songs about the little ‘rock-fast rock-folk’ who have never borne stick or bludgeon, a little lavish as far as promises go, and a little hair-splitting when he soberly discusses the promise he gave at a feast for fulfilment on the day of crisis. But all, as I say, only quite a little ; his failure, his superiority, do not go far ; he is a fraction in great and in small, a fraction in evil and a fraction in good ; but the worst of it is, every factor of the fraction utterly vitiates all the rest.”

This reveals only one of the least important of the poet's many ideals. But it is significant of the desire he always has that men should "see to the nethermost depth of each of their deeds." His ideals are not new—that cannot be expected; but they are trumpet-toned expressions of good old ideals—and that is what frail beings in search of moral strength and rightness do well to desire. Nor is anything to the contrary expressed when you have said "hackneyed," "fanciful," "priggish," "exaggerated." There is a happy percussive impact of the minor *Brand* ideals on the reader's mind which shows that they are not hackneyed. "Fanciful" merely means "unfamiliar," and the objection should be got over by meditation. "Priggish" is a mere protest of frivolous irresponsibility. Exaggeration — unconscious in a great poet—is, within the limits of artistic judgment, a great weapon which

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imagination places in his hands for moral purposes. God knows we need ideals to raise us into higher tones of life; and these negatively or positively, in the spiritual, in the domestic, in every life-region, Ibsen gives us. That scourging may be better than quietude; that national necessity should breed heroism, or a people is not worthy of redemption—the real need of the man who cannot live and dare not die; the value of knowing your work; the noble love-thought that so far from love weakening the sense of duty, there should come “a world-wide sea, with scourge of gale and rush of currents” between any two lovers, if one makes of love an excuse for ignobly shirking supreme obligations of life; that faith is likely enough to be of good quality in proportion as it is unconventional; that true sight is “light and wings” to a man; that the image of God which we have stained may rise again in

us "washed by the will;" the doubtful and needing to be qualified, yet important ideal that "we should live the life we know we can;" that, on the other hand, stress and strain are invaluable; that God's love is neither weak nor mild, and that (very daringly said) He was not humane to His Son Jesus Christ; that a road is still needed between life and religion, those at present existing being mere "confusion of everything between a dark lantern and northern lights;"—these are all conceptions such as a great poet earns gratitude by presenting to our sympathies and thoughts.

But I have distinguished between the subsidiary ideals and the paramount ideal of this poem-play. Where the author becomes most powerful over our sense of awe—where he fills us with gloom—where he harrows us, as in the scene in which the pastor's wife is compelled in mere self-

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mortification to surrender every single garment and toy associated with her dead child, on the stern principle, "All or nothing"—the ground of sanity has been departed from; the story is the tragedy of a possessed fanatic. The good purpose in Brand's life is strangled by his preoccupation with self-surrender. His reason is vitiated by a gloomy absorption in self-denial as an aim good in itself. Heightened by restrained and classic word-painting in every noble scenic possibility germane to the theme—deepened by every expedient of heart-rending experience—adorned in the character of Agnes with one of the sweetest and noblest figures in poetry—disfigured only by certain poor polemical parodies of "Humanitarianism," which seem to refer to old provincial controversies—*Brand* is undoubtedly one of the greatest works of ethical imagination that the world has ever seen. It contains in

the following sentence—wholly away from the spirit of the book—one of the loveliest things ever said by a husband to his wife. It is of their child that Brand is speaking to Agnes: “Go and watch him while he sleeps. Sing him into bright dreams. A child’s soul is as clear and placid as a tarn in the summer sunshine. A mother can hover over it like a bird, which, on its silent flight, mirrors her beauty in its deepest depths.”

We have said nothing as yet of that exaction of intellectual affinity in conjugal life which seems to be a fair inference from some of the most interesting of Ibsen’s prose plays, and which as he treats it is almost as unrealizable an ideal as his “All or nothing” in the relations between man and God. It is in this, rather than in the great religious drama of which I have just spoken—in this, and in his firm and penal exposure of the hereditary consequences,

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physiological and moral, of ill-governed life—that he has gained, or almost gained, the character of a prophet. Here again we come upon a theme of vast extent—and this time it is a theme which cannot be systematically discussed. If we may judge by the literature of many countries, there are a great many uncomprehended wives in the world, who are apt, in the language of the old Methodist hymn, to “fill their fellow-creatures’ ears with the sad tales of all their woes;” and there may be some uncomprehended husbands, though they are less vocal and communicative. The husband supposes himself to be uncomprehended in Ibsen’s play of *Rosmersholm*, assisted by the very-much-emancipated endeavours of Miss West. The wife knows herself to be uncomprehended in *A Doll’s House*. The whole subject is sublimated into a condition of hyper-ethereality in *A Lady from the Sea*. No one can deny that,

though such connubial failures have their ridiculous and fussy side, they are a serious factor of human misery. It is misery of a peculiarly acute and wearing kind. It falls mainly on persons especially unable to bear mental pain. It diminishes not only the happiness of homes, but their utility in the scheme of human life. Apart from all this, though the study may be a morbid one, there is no aspect of the great everlasting problem of He and She which supplies more interesting matters of contemplation. In objection to such illustrations in a dramatic form it may be demurred that to exacerbate the idea of deficient affinity in married life will tend to induce people who are unequally yoked to make the worst of their situation instead of the best. And if we are to judge Ibsen moralistically, it must be confessed that the duty of making the best of marriage, which must stand very high in any

practical Christian code, under the existing theory of the marriage connection, appears never to enter his mind. Indeed, he never teaches duty at all in the matter. His characters follow their own sweet, or unsweet wills, with little restraint even from circumstances. The extremely interesting developments of the subject which he achieves are sufficiently absorbing to justify the dramatist as an artist. If he is a witness to fact, the result of his testimony is that those who submit to the want of affinity at home and those who seek for affinity abroad are about equally miserable.

Some will see in these statements sufficient ground for condemning Ibsen's plays of this class. But I adhere to my principle that, where work is great, you ought not to ostracize it, and indeed cannot. A dramatist is no more bound to satisfy you and me with the moralistic tendencies of his plays than is a poet to satisfy you and

me with his ideals. Are these marriage-plays important—able? do they reveal striking aspects of life? have they in them the quality to become classic? are the scenes they depict such as will be remembered?

But this is putting the defence of Ibsen very low. The net result of his marriage-plays is a demand for more real, more refined, more soul-satisfying compatibility between husbands and wives. It is a large subject, and one not convenient or even ripe for public discussion. This, however, may be positively said—Anything that tends to a discreet choice, apart from mere undefinable liking or fancy, will improve the average of marriages. Much at the last must depend on chance, but chance should be eliminated as far as possible. Both sexes have been much to blame, and even where there has been much mutual accommodation after marriage, it has often been

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not quite in the best spirit, or with adequate tact, or with anything like the resource that is found in dealing with other exigencies of life. The need of a better and more intellectual companionship—no new lesson, for it has been as continuously taught as, in the choice of partners, it has been frequently disregarded—was one that needed to be taught in a new way, so as to make the possibilities as well as the impossibilities of marriage a living theme of thought and speech. It has certainly in Ibsen's hands gravely affected European, and especially British opinion. Alike in the beginning and in the continuance—let us hope very seldom in the ending—of the marriage relationship, much of this part of Ibsen's work is instructive as well as vivid. The best thing we can hope is that it will instruct the right people in the right way. May I say thus publicly—that I have heard things of young couples

since Ibsen became known to us which encouraged me to believe that they had found in his gloomy exhibition of incompatibilities and wayward affinities an unexpected gospel? They found it in their enjoyment by contrast of a conscious and elaborated companionship and co-operation which they had not observed among many of their friends, and which, except in the love - instincts of courtship — too often illusory—they had not really anticipated.

Nor may we leave out of sight that for good or for evil—I believe, with all drawbacks, for good—Ibsen has set a fashion which has made our own stage illustrate for the first time with any seriousness, the doctrine of pre-nuptial morality on the part of men ; a doctrine which, in one way and another, has been discredited, or at least held in abeyance by society ; a doctrine which is even now by many regarded as a pious opinion or a counsel of perfection ; a

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doctrine for which we are now at the fulness of time ; a doctrine which is necessary to rectify the balance of our morality and the balance of justice between the sexes. Anything that can purify the young male life will work a most salutary revolution in society.

I hope I do not seem to be pressing this matter unduly. I am painfully sensible of the difficulty of pressing it at all. Good people cannot believe what evil exists. Worldly people will not believe that the evil can in any appreciable degree be got rid of. But it is worthy of consideration how wonderfully the manners and opinions of society have improved since the last century ; and within the next half-century there will, I believe, be a greatly accelerated improvement. It looks as little likely now as the improvement we have realized looked in the days of Lord Byron. But it will come ; and it will be much facilitated

by the effect of that culture of women which is here so greatly promoted.

I can only hint at the immensely important fact that this subject has—and must have—bearings on health and heredity which Ibsen has not shrunk from exploiting. He has been charged with obscenity. There is one puzzling instance which it is difficult to explain away. But I do not class as obscene the deliberate and brave tackling with high moralistic purpose of subjects which, though generally tabooed by delicacy, may occasionally be dealt with courageously by a great master of human life upon his responsibility—than which none can be more serious than that which had fallen upon Ibsen as a great teacher of men by the time he wrote the solemn play called *Ghosts*.

Returning for a moment to the plays in which he has dealt with the more refined aspects of affinity or non-affinity in married

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life, I must forego the attempt to trace in this place the meaning of so subtle a drama as *A Lady from the Sea*. Our public have lately had an opportunity of seeing *Rosmersholm* played with skill and power. Deformed as it is by being brought down to the scale of parochial pettinesses, and rendered "queer"—there is no other word for it—by the strange use as chorus of one of Ibsen's odd literary wastrels—it is none the less a tragedy of extraordinary and grasping power. Indeed, it is a double tragedy. A wife supposed not to comprehend her husband has been driven to self-inflicted death before the play begins by a supposed comprehending female friend of the husband, in whom rivalry and a yearning affinity constitute a fanaticism, and who has intrigued herself enthusiastically into the household. This awful suicide before the rising of the curtain is in apposition to the double suicide

of Rosmersholm and Rebecca West, which at the fall of the curtain is seen from a window and reported by the old servant to the audience, and so ends the piece. The shifting metaphysical business of the action, all the power of which lies with Miss West, falls between these two tragic incidents. The lady is very convincing. If she were vulgar, maladroit, unimpressive, unlikely to win admiration and influence, the necessary probability of the tragedy would be lacking. As it is, the play has to contend, in a cosmopolitan sphere, with deficiencies characteristic of Ibsen's peculiar provincial method. At one time it is polished in its social intercourse and by-play: affording Miss West opportunities such as she might have in a play by Sardou; at another time it is mere antic, or little else, or concerned episodically in dull local controversy. In the antic passages in which Brendel figures,

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we have a curious instance of Ibsen's dependence for chorus on eccentric men of Bohemian and dissolute habits. In these characters—scarcely ever brought on our stage—he seems to discern a kind of philosophical inspiration; with the effect upon British audiences that the worser sort laugh and the better sort sustain a moral shiver as at the puzzling presence of something uncanny. In the Bacchic incursions of Ulric Brendel, in the dogmatic formalities of Rector Kroll, and in Rosmersholm's weak conversation with a low-minded local editor, the strongest interest of the drama runs a risk of being dissipated. But as Rebecca's motive and character are developed, the Ibsen grip grows firmer. During long passages the play becomes as weird and awe-compelling by its mere revelations of an unscrupulous but afflated and intense personality as any drama ever became by the use of

supernatural or melodramatic effects. Such is the strange, absorbing action that lies between the single suicide of the destroyed wife and the double suicide of the victims of a crude and unaccomplished affinity. I have never found any tragedy more really tragic. As in *Macbeth*, but more so, we are led to remark sardonically what poor creatures men are that women make such a fuss about; but Rebecca is quite a nineteenth-century boudoir Lady Macbeth. She is sometimes called an adventuress. The epithet cannot with any nicety be applied to her. She is a dreadful woman of another sort. Unscrupulous as she is, she is sincerely concerned for Rosmersholm as for herself. She desires with a devouring hunger that they should both live their lives and live them together, and that their lives should be one and indivisible, and largely operative. She is quite indifferent who suffers in order that this may

be ; but it is only under this strong impulse that she behaves as an adventuress would behave for sheer self-interest. All the same, it is doubtless true that if she had not found this excitement she would have craved another.

The superiority which is secured to *Rosmersholm* by its gloomy tragic force is secured to *A Doll's House* by wild and subtle and invincible domestic pathos. Who that has seen or even read this play can ever forget the winsome young wife, loving her husband and loved by him, but miserable perpetually under the knowledge that she and her ways and her life are mere innocent toys to him? In any case a woman of her noble temperament must have suffered from this, but Nora Helmer has in her heart the memory of a great criminal sacrifice that she has made for the husband who considers her a mere pretty twittering lark, occasionally condescending

in the majesty of his masculine nature to allow his senses to be dazzled by her beauty and her brightness. She waits for her miracle—the miracle of intelligent gratitude from a nature too hide-bound in its own conceptions to apprehend, still more to appreciate, the heroism she has achieved. Her miracle never, never comes. This play has scarcely any of the crudeness characteristic of the author. It is Ibsen with few of Ibsen's weaknesses. With homely natural art the poor woman is shown swallowing her tears, keeping down her misery, playing with her children, keeping at arm's length the husband's friend who would make love to her. More and more impossible her life becomes to her. At last she is compelled by circumstances to confess to her husband that years ago she committed forgery to save his life. This is the critical moment; and the miracle comes not. The husband densely

fails to appreciate her tremendous sacrifice. He is at first loftily severe, and afterwards smugly forgiving. "There is something," says he, in this latter vein—"something indescribably sweet and soothing to a man in having forgiven his wife—honestly, from the bottom of his heart." In that moment it bursts upon her that she "has been living in that home these eight years with a strange man, and has borne him three children." When her husband sees nothing but imprudence and dishonour in the great deed of glorious shame which she has committed for his sake, and graciously forgives her for it, talking seriously to her for the first time in their lives, the rest is heart-break—but not submission. She will be the little squirrel, the toy-wife, no longer. The wild, whirling dance has prefigured her revolt, though Helmer only saw in it a merry hysteria that tickled his senses—the spurning of his endearments shudderingly

anticipated the end—the sudden leaving home—the heavily banged street door—the silence of the after-separation. Here the thesis of Ibsen's affinity-plays is supported by a touching story, and the heroine lives for ever in our affections.

I have said nothing of Ibsen's political plays. All have good general principles, especially of public spirit and of individual upright conduct in public life. All possess grit and grip. All succeed, in spite of intense and belittling provinciality. The historical plays are able and have fine passages and striking characters and collocation of characters. In *Emperor and Galilean* there is a strong and very unfavourable embodiment of Julian. The finest female character in all Ibsen I take to be Lona Hessel in *The Pillars of Society*, in which play there is enough sound doctrine and example of life and manners to make us all good men and women, if we

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will condescend to be preached to from a provincial text.

And, after all, why not? We, at least, have some reason to respect provinciality. Are we not proud of the manageable, comprehensible, capable-of-being-stimulated life with which we are all familiar? Do we not value the individuality, the power, the self-respect, the past growth and the makable history of the great cities in which some of us have been born and to which many of us have been drawn? *

* University College, Liverpool, was founded fifteen years ago by public subscription and large individual benefactions. The total sum so applied in money, land and buildings was about £404,000 of which the municipal corporation voted £30,000 in land. Almost all the money was given within a couple of years. And about the same time the people of Liverpool subscribed £96,000 for the establishment of the diocese, and £155,000 for the rebuilding of the Royal Infirmary, of which £15,000 was granted by the corporation. I mention these remarkable amounts, not for their own sake, but because they illustrate the public spirit of a provincial community and imply a great and increasing general interest in the best things.

Do we not say to ourselves, and rightly, that the opportunities for strong individual public responsibility, whether in public or private life, are greater here than in a capital? Are we not conscious that to help culture and morals and the doing of good here is more practicable? Are we not aware that if we are doing no good in art, in letters, in science, in philanthropy and in religion here we are neglecting that which lies next, nay, under our hands?

This is what Ibsen has never neglected. Whatever his faults, his shortcomings, he has always striven to give men and women better ideals, and he has for the most part shown them these within their daily lives, and not beyond them. We may wonder, as we read his plays, what Norway is. There are some who say that he lived away at Munich, and forgot what manner of place his native country was, and misrepresented his fellow-countrymen. To us there is the

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note of human nature, of provincial human nature, of human nature somewhat sublimated by modern culture, but still *naïve* in revelation of itself in all that he has written. And plays that can so be described are plays for us to study.

POSTSCRIPT.

THE play *Little Eyolf* has been produced since this lecture was delivered, and, having lately been played in London, has given rise to considerable discussion. It is undoubtedly a great, while a morbid, work. Its morbidness is no argument against its greatness. *Little Eyolf* does not suggest to me any general criticisms that are not covered by the lecture.

The champagne scene is a transcript of life, skilfully and delicately rendered—so delicately as to incur a necessary improbability. Such things do happen where men and women are of contrasted sexual temperament or pass into contrasted sexual moods. But if silence is broken, it is with

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more passionate and literal speech. Rita's expressions on the central idea of the discussion are more oblique and literary than those of a wife of her temperament at such a juncture would be. This is obviously for reasons of decorum in a scene that was to be publicly represented. So that if you grant that Ibsen was entitled to broach the subject, gratuitous indelicacy in his manner of doing so is the last thing with which he can be truly charged. And any one who supposes that Ibsen adventures upon such episodes for the sake of nastiness does not, I am persuaded, in the least degree understand the man, though I suspect Ibsen may be capable of a certain elation in bold recognition of sexual considerations where important dramatic events turn on them. "Necessary questions of the play" do turn on them—at least as indicative criteria—oftener than has been supposable from the avoidance of this phase in the general run

of serious conjugal drama. The grave question whether such things ought to be recognized in public plays, offers to a dramatist of true insight the dilemma of leaving his theme insufficiently elucidated or shocking the public. Ibsen steps over the difficulty by genius, and what unquestionable genius produces true criticism may canvass, but will not reject. Ibsen's conception of Rita has contributed to the drama a thoroughly revealing portraiture of a healthy, womanly, wifely, motherly woman driven into unhealth (as a mother) and towards unhealth (as a wife) by the declension into mechanical sexual indifference of the man whom she loves body and soul, and to whom without a moment's default or intermission or entertainment of the idea of change, she, body and soul, has remained, so to speak, ravenously faithful. This, her full and phenomenal faithfulness, makes her case

vividly tragical. If the subject is an improper one, Ibsen's genius has forced the world to contemplate what ought to be ignored. But as to the manner, it could not have been more devoid of offence.

The more artful art of Mr. Pinero almost always baulks us of the complete and logical pursuance of a problem by some cross-scent of chance incident—as, for instance, the conventual education of Mr. Tanqueray's daughter by his first wife. Even in the Ibsen plays, problems are qualified by perturbations such as the discovery in *Little Eyolf* that Asta is not really entitled as a sister to “the only love that is not subject to the law of change.” This thread of peculiar hue is worked into the pattern with great skill and much strengthens the interest, while, and at the same time, partly evading the problem. The sister who proves no sister saves herself and her *quasi*-brother-lover by flight with a persevering and only

half-loved wooer, braving the risk pointed out to her of "finding the right fellow-traveller when it is too late." The *dénouement* which comes to Allmers and Rita, or to which they deliberately advance, is so transcendently alien from Ibsen's usual pessimism that it provokes a doubt whether the dramatist believes in it, or is offering a saturnine, solemn hoax to a public which desires "happy endings." It is approached and accomplished, however (juvenile as may seem its quality, if single-mindedly devised), with perfectly achieved and impressing sincerity. There is no false note in the intense purpose of the two troubled beings as they resolve, having missed their own way to happiness, to spend their remaining time in improving the lot of the poor and vicious. Played with due inspiration, the scene must produce in any audience deep interest, though that interest will be unattended with any

conviction that husband and wife will live happy ever afterwards. We may plead in bar of criticism on the score of unlikelihood that a couple who have developed so metaphysical a cloud-structure out of a matrimonial incompatibility often treated as a matter of course, are likely enough on the rebound to take up with any humanitarian fanaticism.

Of the crutch and the evil eye and the rat-wife it is only necessary to say that they are good examples of the mystical expedients by which Ibsen surrounds his problems with glamour. The question of the utility of the play is not material to criticism, but I hold it important, and do not shirk it. Novels and plays are the reverse of useful if applied with indiscriminate comparison to our actual lives; but such a play as *Little Eyolf* upholds a true ideal of connubial union—that exemplified by Rita: a whole heart and a

responsive temperament. Everything that is unpleasant, deplorable and puzzling in the play, comes of defection from that ideal. This is enough to guide sensible people to the stimulus and the correction which the play should yield them.

To some minds the saddest thing in this fine play is one that to the ordinary man and woman is the gladdest—namely, the convenient exit of Asta from the Allmers household by her marriage with the persistent wooer to whom she has confessed that she can only give half of herself. This is the link that most practically connects the story with the most ever-recurring factor of the conjugal department of human life—namely, the readiness of women on various pretexts to have recourse to ill-assorted union. What hope is there of improvement in this region of the human lot when a woman of bright intelligence and full acquaintance with the problem,

and deeply in love with a man she cannot marry, solves—or rather renews—the difficulty by going off and marrying a man she does not love; and when we all feel that this is just what would be likely to happen in real life amid general applause?

PART II.

BY

PERCY CROSS STANDING.



CHAPTER I.

THE FIGHTER LOOKING BACK.

“THE State must go !” declared Ibsen to a friend some years ago—a sufficiently Revolutionary declaration. Revolutionist or not, the effect which Ibsen’s writings have produced upon modern thought will hardly be realized until their misinterpreted, misunderstood author shall have passed into the silence. Ibsen had almost attained the winter of life ere his most popular efforts were given to the world. Goëthe finished *Faust* at the age of sixty-six. Ibsen did not complete his *Master-Builder* until sixty winters had whitened his head. And probably most who knew his work will agree that the Norwegian master did not

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attain the height of his power as play-writer until the publication of *The Master-Builder*. For if *Ghosts* and *A Doll's House* laid the foundations of a fame that can never grow stale, and if *Hedda Gabler* cemented the beginnings of a real castle, it was reserved for *The Master-Builder* to gild its author with the title of "master" himself.

In a study of the works of this writer, you are the most struck by the remarkable simplicity of his diction, more effective than any excursion into far-distant realms of hyperbole. You can never understand your Ibsen—so much is certain, whatever the theme—and the theme is generally the all-absorbing one of women and men. Some critics have found Nora Helmer, in *A Doll's House*, the finest among his feminine creations—so far as regards the social dramas for which the world mainly knows him. And without doubt Nora possesses a beautiful mind; but to my thinking,

graceful, imperious, wayward Hilda Wangel is her superior as a piece of creative work. Ibsen loves to typify; and each of these women may be reckoned, in her different way, a type of her sex's "unrest." Watch Nora as she fights out the great conflict with herself, to make the terrible discovery that she has "been living with a strange man for eight years, and has borne him three children." Or observe Hilda, as, without the least thought of wrong-doing, she blithely enters into the life of the man who, ten years before, has promised to make her "his little princess."

In drawing the two principal characters in his *Master-Builder*, Ibsen, always trying, and trying vainly, to overtake and embrace his own ideals, seems to me to symbolize the unattainable. As he would be the first to admit, he has not wholly succeeded—for those ideals do not exist, unfortunately. It is himself, say some Continental critics,

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that he represents in the character of Solness, "the old fighter looking back (*regardant derrière lui*) surveying the long working day, and counting the cost." But in reality, the only character in which Ibsen avowedly symbolizes himself is that of the courageous Dr. Stockmann, in *An Enemy of the People*—the least imaginative of the plays, but, for that self-same reason, not the least interesting. The time has long ago passed for receiving with incredulity and disdain a work from this pen. Ibsen's admirers will hardly have forgotten the outcry of "improper"—and worse—that greeted the publication of *Hedda Gabler* in 1889. As a psychological study of a certain type of femininity, the character of Hedda presents the most remarkable (though not the most attractive!) of Ibsen's feminine creations. There is ever the same brilliant subtlety of suggestion, the same simplicity of diction, as witness this extract

from the wonderful dialogue with Lövborg—

“*Hedda*: Cannot you understand that a young girl, if it can be done in—in secret——?”

“*Lövborg*: Well?”

“*Hedda*: Would like very much to have a peep into a world which——

“*Lövborg*: Which?”

“*Hedda*: Which she is not allowed to know anything about?”

“*Lövborg*: Comradeship in the desire of life. But then, why could it not have gone on?”

“*Hedda*: That was your own fault.

“*Lövborg*: It was you who broke it off.

“*Hedda*: Yes, there was the imminent danger that our relationship might have become a reality. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Ejbert Lövborg. How could you wish to take advantage of me, your trusting comrade?”

One noted French critic has characterized the works of Ibsen, and, I think, justly, as the Drama of Ideas; but he hastens to indicate that by “ideas” he does not mean “theses.” And he submits that the only question which preoccupies

the dramatist throughout his productions is the question of how to reconcile the life of society with the inner life of to-day? Certain it is that the hostile remarks that many among our best-known — by which I do not mean our best — critics still indulge in at Ibsen's expense, are marked by anything save a profound knowledge of his abstract intentions. In fact, it remains a standing reproach to that which passes for English criticism, that Continental writers have in the main not only formed a better appreciation of Ibsen's inner meanings, but are usually able to interpret them after a more reasonable fashion.

For example, the opinion of Vald-Vedel, the Danish literary critic, that Building-master Solness stands for the author looking back upon himself and his life's work, is a singularly beautiful, if erroneous, construction. Why should not the master

symbolize himself and all that he has attempted, in the character of a master-builder? At all events, Vedel religiously abstains from imitating those Norse, Swedish, Finnish, and other penmen, who complain of what they now style Ibsen's "lack of new ideas." He even suggests that *The Master-Builder* spelt a fresh development of the Drama of Ideas. "It was after all these ideas had come into organic unison in Ibsen's brain, that he constructed *la trame* which gave them dramatic form."

Nevertheless, many have been exceedingly severe upon the character of Solness. Vedel thought that his grandeur "was of a brutal order, and his language at times vulgar." Vedel was wrong—wrong as the doctors were in thinking Solness mad. His language is *never* vulgar. Again, Frederick Jungersen was almost brutally unjust in affirming that "after all, he (Solness) finished by building, not only

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'houses for men only,' but palaces for lust." Doubtless this critic was making allusion to the "castles in the air," "the most beautiful things in the world," as Hilda calls them. Ibsen never came nearer, closer to warm reality—it sounds paradoxical, perhaps—than when he constructed these castles in the air. For they daily encroach upon our lives, these castles, do they not? If we but knew it, we all are living in a world of illusions, unrealities, impossibilities—and this most of all when we are fancying ourselves strong and practical. These "castles" are so easy to build that we go on constructing them all day and every day; but delicious as it is to live *in* them, how hopeless to have to admit that we cannot live *on* them! And this is what Ibsen realizes for us again and again.

In some sense, and particularly in his Socialism, Ibsen is a kind of decadent

William Morris—the poet of “the long, long day of the darkness.” In the deeper sense, how much more nearly does he resemble Whitman!

Tjugonde Häftat, of Upsala, has affirmed that the characters of Hedda Gabler and of Solness the Master-Builder form a natural sequence, the one to the other. Hedda, he says, “proves the error of Ibsen’s earlier theories, until at last we see a man who falls from the top of the tower of vanity, cruelty, and lust which he has constructed for himself.” But is it so? We know that if Hedda is a woman so terribly and constantly swayed by gnawing discontent, that at times her spirit holds depths blacker than Erebus itself, so is Hilda a girl-woman wholly antithetical—imperious, impulsive, passionate, joyous, “herself,” until the moment when the “troll” that possesses her forces her into the presence of Solness. Never is

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this vital character more witchingly vivacious than when she cries, with such heartfelt meaning, "Yes! father's alive!" in reply to Solness's query. But to declare that Hilda lives because Hedda died the death, is surely folly of the most profound. No, it is simply that Ibsen, during long years, has been perfecting and polishing his extraordinary knowledge of the feminine mind. Has not some epigrammatist said that only two men, Henrik Ibsen and George Meredith, really understand women?

By the time he wrote *The Master-BUILDER*, Ibsen had indeed incurred a heavy responsibility as prophet. We find this expressed, often vaguely but always beautifully, in his frequent references to the influence of "the younger generation." The young with the old—Hilda with Solness—he makes "climb right to the top," but not, alas! hand in hand. Ranging back to *Hedda*

Gabler, we find it said of her by one of the Philistines that "in the life of Hedda, nothing suited her half so well as the quitting of it." Another thinks that the death of Hedda is arbitrary, just as arbitrary as the catastrophe of Solness. To this opinion I cannot subscribe. But, admitting the theory of Judge Brack, that "people don't do such things" as the pistol-shot in *Hedda Gabler*, I submit that the tragedy of the tower in *The Master-Builder* strikes the reader with a sense of profoundest sadness. For, admitting again the sometimes uninviting and invidious exterior of Solness, he had lived the saddest, most broken of lives—he, who "could not live," as he cries in his agony, "without joy in life." Ibsen pre-eminently possesses the trick of depicting characters as delicately chiselled as they are human. In almost every instance his creations exemplify Truth to Life.

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No matter which of these dramas you select, nearly all of the personages introduced stand, so to speak, for the very realism of the ideal. Thus, Solness thinks at first that he will only build churches for God: he builds, he is disappointed, for behold! the people will not have these churches. ("Fancy their not wanting them!" says Hilda, *sotto voce*.) Then, to console himself, he determines he will build "homes for human beings." Here, again, he is doomed to failure. He finds that "men have no need of these houses of theirs to live in," and "building houses is not worth sixpence." Reader, men *have* no need of these homes of theirs to be happy in—where "father and mother and the troop of children may live together in comfort and happiness, secure in the lovely thought that they belong to each other." As Solness found by experience, and after it was too late, "the whole is nothing." Or take the

character of Aline Solness. Halvard and Aline are a typical, everyday instance of silent tragedy in domestic life—the courage and energy and vitality of the man kept down and stifled by the hopeless, unresponsive nature of the woman. Here we have a man, yet in his vigour and prime, starving for lack of a love that would make and shape his life—even the life of Solness, the great, the famous Master-Builder. It is at this juncture that Hilda Wangl comes tripping upon the scene. She is the New Spirit, she comes “under a new banner,” to apprise her Master-Builder that “the ten years” are expired. She represents the younger generation that he loves and fears, and the stretching out of his hands to her is involuntary and uncontrollable. The words of a minor poet come to mind as we linger over the sad fates of Solness and his wife, his mind becoming atrophied for lack of that which

could make and mould it, her time passed in vain imaginings, idle regrets, dead longings—

“We marvel that the silence can divide
The living from the dead; yet more apart
Are they who all life long dwell side by side,
But never heart by heart.”

And yet, even to Mrs. Solness, it is given to say several beautiful things, as witness her comparison of her childhood's dolls and her dead babies—“I carried them under my heart like little unborn children.” But now . . . there is Hilda coming into the husband's broken life. I must confess that I have failed to find the slightest impurity in their relations. It has been foolishly, ignorantly said that Ibsen preaches “free love” wholesale and indiscriminate. How? when? where? Solness is surely intended to typify the Spirit of the Age, unbending in his resolves to be first at all hazards, not

to be trampled underfoot by that terrible younger generation, striving hard to put aside sentimentality for ever and brand himself Man of the World alone. Hilda steps in to disarrange his plans.

Given another wife—a woman, not a human mummy—Solness must have been a different man. “The girl from Lysanger” was to him as Josephine to Napoleon, with the difference that Josephine lacked Hilda’s will-power. “I can die for you, Sire, but I cannot quit you,” exclaimed the deposed consort: not so Hilda. Talleyrand would never have got through with his Act of Separation if he had had to deal with a Hilda Wangel. Until she appeared, Solness’s will had been paramount; it was forced to bow down and accommodate itself to hers. “There is not a corner in me safe from you,” he says to her. In the scene—or rather, at that point in the duologue—where he broaches the subject of “the

Viking spirit," one obtains a rare insight into the young girl's character. She tells him she would like him to possess, even as the old Vikings did, "a radiantly healthy conscience;" she would have him *dare* do what he *would*. On another page she tells him (making you think that the young ladies of Lysanger must be satirical and unsympathetic critics) that he is "a builder with a dizzy conscience." Frank and unashamed Hilda certainly is; but one cannot resist catching an inspiration of the Master-BUILDER's infatuation for her when, towards the last, she dares him to mount the dizzy scaffolding. Not only scaffolding is it for Solness. It is the scaffold.

Ibsen might advantageously have entitled this play *An Idyll of Castle-Building*. It is not yet understood of the people—true. Spite of the remarks of the captious and the Philistine, though, Hilda is far, far more than "a splendid animal." Hand in

hand with her, his creation, he has mounted; yet something seems wildly to suggest that Ibsen has hardly been "able to do it after all . . ."

An ingenious Norwegian once suggested that, in the character of Hilda, Ibsen typifies the Spirit of Inebriety, and, in the "ten years," an inveterate drunkard who voluntarily debars himself from strong drink for the space of a decade. Such symbolizing is "pleasing" or not, as one cares to take it; for it is only by the exegesis of some such parable that one can always depend upon being successful, as Sir Edward Russell expresses it, in "reading one's secret into" these Ibsen books. And here I am reminded that my distinguished collaborator has assumed that we cannot have the greatest of great plays from this pen until it is successful in depicting beings who "enlist our sympathies as well as appeal to our intellects." In the present

state of society, is this opinion acceptable? Would Ibsen be well advised to act upon it? Is it to be supposed that he ever will act upon it? No. For it is his inimitable manner of treating the unlovely that attracts, his vital method of grappling with the sordid and the sinful, and of shedding God's daylight upon it. Society is a cancer. Was it not James Hinton who uttered that immortal truth, pregnant with so deep and dark a meaning, "'Overturning society' is an inverted pyramid getting straight"? If Ibsen has not proved wholly successful in cutting out the cancer, he has revolutionized people's minds; and that, as he himself has said, "is the one thing that avails." Herein he proves to us that he is not merely the author: he is the *seer*.

It is the penalty of most inceptors of new movements that they shall be scorned and persecuted. Prophets are in the

minority because, as Stockmann says, "the compact majority is never right." Victor Hugo's view of the French Revolution is that "these things would never have happened if they had hanged Voltaire and sent Rousseau to the galleys." Perhaps Hugo is right. At all events, failing the hanging or shooting of those philosophers, the Revolution *did* come about. The *noblesse* laughed aloud at the publication of Rousseau's *Contrat Social*; but they laughed too soon, and it is an indisputable fact that their own skins went to bind its second edition. With Rousseau so with Ibsen—he is the enemy of society.

Do life-stories ever end, except with parting or except with death? Ibsen thinks not. That is the reason why the bulk of his work leaves us with a great sense of unrest, of incompleteness, "just like the ruins left by a fire." On each last page of almost every play we find a

note of interrogation, an unanswered query. Probably the aptest illustration of this inconsequent "incompleteness" is to be found in the concluding sentence of *Hedda Gabler*, uttered by Judge Brack, and so profoundly surcharged with bitterest irony at the expense of the society of our day who "don't do such things."

So that the author of *Ghosts*, whose views of life would deserve to be stigmatized as pitifully pessimistic if they were not so pitiably, terribly true, sums up to the cold, sad conclusion that the whole of life, as one lives it, is "nothing." Meanwhile, he hopes for a happier consummation of his unfulfilled ideals in the direction where Hilda Wangel hears "harps in the air."

CHAPTER II.

ALL OR NOTHING.

Peer Gynt and *Brand* are the two great poem-plays—so curiously and wonderfully contrasted—by which Ibsen has attained a fame totally different to that won for him by the group of social problem plays. *Peer Gynt* himself is the personification of the idea of Self. “To be one’s self is to lose one’s self” he declares; and upon this harsh, relentless doctrine of the fight for self-absorbing self, the whole theory of *Peer Gynt* is worked out. Just as Building-Master Solness stands for abject fear of that terrible “younger generation”—the building upon others to avoid

being down-trodden in the fray—so does the complex, vicious character of Peer stand for belief in a man being “enough for himself.” *Actable* this work is not and never can be. Rather is it intended for the study than the stage—more as an undying sermon than an attempt to draw a theatre audience out of itself. Ibsen is fond of one dominant figure to work out the destinies of the plots that he lays down. The figures that are grouped around Peer Gynt are mostly puppets, or little else—as Peer’s mother, the pastor, the peasant-soldier, the extraordinary half-mystical figure of the woman with whom this intellectual bagman has such extraordinary relations. In the same sense that Peer dwarfs the other characters, Solness is all-dominant in *The Master-Builder*, Mrs. George Tesman in *Hedda Gabler*, Dr. Stockmann in *An Enemy of the People*, and so on.

But *Brand* is the typical instance of Ibsen's employment of the one central figure to unfold his narrative, to point his moral. Professor Herford has well said that in this, in many essentials the crowning work of his genius, the poet-dramatist fuses the intellectual athleticism of a Browning with the prophetic fire of a Carlyle. If *Peer Gynt* be representative of Self, then all the more is *Brand* the veritable figure of Will. The Norse priest who fights religion in religion's own name is undoubtedly the most brilliantly idealistic portrait in the whole Ibsen gallery. Cromwell would have made a general of the man who is so torn to the inmost core by this terrible "thunder of the wind of Will," that he forces his wife, his dearly loved Agnes, to part with every shred of the clothing of her dead child to the first mother that approaches needing the where-withal to clothe a living child. (But

would Brand, in his splendid austerity and unevangelical ideals, have tolerated a Cromwell's peculiar doctrines of earthly ambition?) The religious irreligion of Brand, the teacher and priest at times makes us shudder even while we reverence. The climax of the story comes when the first mother that approaches turns out to be of light character. But Brand's insistence upon the dread doctrine of All or Nothing is inexorable indeed! "He gives to the devouring wave," he exclaims to Agnes, "who in his giving gives not *all*," and then it is that the horrid ragged woman, with the starved child of shame at her breast, addresses Brand thus—

"Wot ye where it was, that birth?
 In a ditchside on the ground.
 Gamblers drank and shouted round—
 Christen'd in the sleety slime,
 Cross'd with charcoal-ashes' grime,
 Suckled with a spirit-flask—
 When his mother bore him first,

There were some stood by and cursed.
Who could they be, do you ask?
Bless you! Why, the baby's father,
Or—the baby's fathers rather!

“*Brand*: Agnes?

“*Agnes*: Yes.

“*Brand*: Thy duty's clear.

“*Agnes (shuddering)*: Never, never! Brand, to her!

“*The Woman*:

“Give me, give me! Give me all!

Silk and broider'd jacket small!

Nought's too good and nought's too bad,

If 'twill warm my starving lad.

He'll be going by-and-by,

Thaw his body ere he die!

“*Brand (to Agnes)*: Choice is calling! Hear'st thou now?”

This happens on Christmas Eve, and the upshot of it is that the bereaved innocent mother gives to the unbereft guilty mother every scrap of clothing in which “was clad at the font my little lad.” I submit that no eye can remain dry as it reads this beautiful and pathetic melody of words.

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Certainly no mother, whether of the living or of the dead, can remain dry-eyed while reading this or the passage immediately subsequent, in which the heartbroken Agnes confesses to her husband that she has concealed the little cap of her dead baby rather than give it to the woman. Now it is that Brand takes the cap from her, hastens after the woman, and hands the last relic to her. What is Agnes's rejoinder? Does Ibsen spoil this magnificently reverent picture by making his ideal wife and woman rail at her husband's relentlessness? No! With that note of calm resignation that Ibsen loves so well—reminding one of a lovely passage in *In Memoriam*—

“(‘ And in my heart, if calm at all,
If any calm, a calm despair.’) ”

she exclaims—

“ O, how wond'rous is God's way!
By that sacrifice so grievous

—Won from bondage is my soul;
He was given us but to lead us,
Died to lure me to the goal."

—in short, she thanks her husband for his determination to make her sacrifice Self to Will, Nothing to All—and who at this juncture can remain unoppressed by tears? A few pages earlier we have heard Brand and Agnes talking of their wee dead boy. The pent-up sorrow in her, the flood-gates of holiest maternity, must have their way, and we seem almost to hear her beautiful, broken tones as she sobs out—

"Here must the candles stand.
Last year he stretch'd his tiny hand
After the glancing, dancing light:
He was so joyous and so bright,
He started from his little chair
And ask'd me if a sun it were."

Note the beautifully natural touch of despairing, bereft motherhood that always speaks of the lost one as "he." Note, too, the wonderfully subtly-suggested gradations

of Brand's determination, heart-broken though he himself may be and is, to check at all costs this eternal longing of Agnes for the bringing-back of her dead. Once more it is the triumph of Will—and his conquers over hers. Well may Sir Edward Russell write that Brand's speech to Agnes over the cot of their sleeping child (earlier in the poem) is the loveliest thing ever said by a husband to a wife. We admire and marvel at Brand, the prophet and seer, because it is never found possible to break either him or his resolution down. As he remarks to his crafty enemy, the Mayor (the latter a type of Norse provincialism that Ibsen has an extraordinary facility and skill in creating)—

“ ‘The day will come when we shall know
That triumph's height is Overthrow.’ ”

—or again when, as in the last act of the five in which this dream-poem is contained,

we find him openly at war with the clergy and laity alike, to whom he declares that his eyes are unclosed at last, that until now he has seen not that the call was for *Nothing* or else *All*. But now, he says in his frenzy of passion for "the God Who hateth lies," he defines the Devil as "compromise," and he, even he, Brand, will end it for ever and ever—

"Men, at the crossway stand ye: choose!
Wholly ye must will to lose
The old vesture of your lust,
Utterly anew be clad,
Ere our Temple from the dust
Rises, as it shall and must!"

Yet even at this sublime moment Ibsen's exquisite cynic humour makes itself felt like a whip-lash, as he figures to us the irresponsible Dean and the backsliding Mayor writhing under the chastisement of this godlike priest's unsparing tongue. (The Dean: "The Mayor's chatter he

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must mean." The Mayor: "That's the twaddle of the Dean.") The end is now in sight. We see Brand set upon and stoned by the ignorant, the lewd, the hater. And in the end he does not lie down to die. Rather does he fall crushed under the avalanche of Will. Like a deified Excelsior he climbs, "bleeding and broken," up the mountains of ice and snow, "towards the peaks," as Ibsen has said elsewhere, "towards the stars, and towards the great silence." But in his hand he bears no "banner with a strange device," no Tannhäuser staff destined to break forth into blossom and bloom. He needs it not. The great ghostly glacier shines ice-white, but scarcely whiter than the soul of Brand. He climbs on and ever upwards unto God's own Sanctuary, and out of the parted heavens a voice calls to us through the crashing thunder that "He is the God of Love."

Yes, *Brand* is typical of God Himself.

Ibsen was once heard to say, "I pride myself on the objectivity of my *Brand*." And to Professor Herford he has said, "I wanted a verse in which I could career where I would, as on horseback." How nobly that expresses the noble metre in which the poem is wrought! If our own language contains anything couched in a similar versification that can compare with it in simple beauty, in wealth of wording, or in that indescribable quality of poesy that leaves the eyelids wet even as one reads, I must confess that it has not been my good fortune to come across it. Who shall say how Ibsen had searched and tried his heart and mind ere *Brand* came into being? I am afraid I cannot agree with Mr. Herford's dictum that it even falls short of *Prometheus Unbound*, in the elements of "ethereal beauty and witching music." How different, too, to anything else that

the same brain has ever given us! The sublimity of Agnes's self-surrender is but the correlative of her higher love for her husband that leaps into being as she marvels and muses over the tearings of his heart-strings, the grandeur of his self-renunciation no less than her own. The Church of Life is in very truth being built up by them—and yet, and yet—

“What will it matter if the end
Was gain'd by telling truth or lying?”

In those words we have the consummation of Brand's great gift—the Irreligion of Religion, the Belief of Unbelief. Never was it his mission to pray, “Help Thou my unbelief!” for does he not stand for Belief in its highest aspects, its most noble and beautiful forms and figures? Brand is *Will*; and, being so, he is enough for himself. “One soul he saved, and that a mad one,” is the Dean's vindictive

epitaph on Brand. And the Prophet's immortal rejoinder is this—

“One Man died for them of yore ;
Cowardice is crime no more !”

But *Brand* is even more than All or Nothing. It is *the all* of All, the nothing of Nothing.

CHAPTER III.

IBSEN AND THE CRITICAL.

THE influence of Ibsen's writings is observable, whether for good or ill—but I think generally for good—in most of the serious work of English dramatic authorship during the last few years, and more particularly during the last three.

Few people who were resident in our nation-city at that time will have forgotten the burst of ridicule and unfair censure evoked by the production of *The Master-Builder* at the Trafalgar Theatre in 1893. The reception of Wagner's first opera smacked of the fairest of fair criticism by comparison! Yet these gentle critics admitted, when questioned, (1) that the play

was magnificently acted; and (2) that it suited itself admirably to stage representation. Since, therefore, the critics did not agree with the "common herd" who allowed that, whereas the great Scandinavian's work might be brilliant, introspective, and realistic, it was not written to be acted—in what did its failing consist? Was it not moral? Were not its conclusions perfectly natural and feasible?

If thus pressed, the critical faculty could furnish you with no adequate rejoinder. Indeed, they forced you, unwillingly enough, to two conclusions: (1) that their condemnation of work from this pen lay to a great extent in the old distich, "I do not like thee, Dr. Fell;" and (2) that their intellects were scarcely of the calibre suited to grapple with such moving problems as those herein attacked; this (2) being a suggestion which I venture to make with all due deference to dramatic critics so

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popular and well-meaning as Mr. Clement Scott and Mr. Moy Thomas.

To all intents and purposes, only a quartette of Ibsen's plays have enjoyed a run of any length in England, viz.: *A Doll's House* in 1889, *Hedda Gabler* in 1891, *The Master-Builder* in 1893, and *Little Eyolf* in 1896. The run of the first-mentioned was only terminated by the fact that certain members of the company were under contract to appear elsewhere at a given date; the second-named was withdrawn in the full tide of financial success; whilst the third attracted so much "business" as the result of a few experimental *matinées*, that it was put on at the Vaudeville Theatre, where it ran for several weeks. At its initial morning performance, £80 was taken by the management—not a bad result for the experimental *matinée* of a new play by an author who, we are still assured, "can never become popular."

Tentative and belated performances only have distinguished the English attempts to produce on the stage his less popular social plays, such as *The Wild Duck* and *Rosmersholm*. Still, it was refreshing to hear Sir Henry Irving's son declaring his admiration for *The Wild Duck*, and avowing his anxiety to sustain the character of Ekdal. Other actors and actresses of repute subscribe to this high opinion of the dramatic merits of this drama, whose simplicity of expression is only equalled by its directness of purpose. On the other hand, Mr. William Heinemann once told me that among Ibsen's dramatic works he awarded the palm to *Emperor and Galilean*—not a "social" drama at all, be it observed. It is that mysterious quality of *camaraderie dans les désirs de la vie*, that the champions of "purity" have invariably found fault with in Ibsen. Such a criticism finds its source mainly in their inability to comprehend.

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It is a remarkable personal fact that Ibsen does not exactly share the views of the Norwegian Left in their demands for a larger share in the government of "United" Scandinavia. Ibsen a "Royalist Democrat"!—is it not terrible even to contemplate? Listen to what he said when addressing a gathering of working-men at Drontheim—the Drontheim of King Olaf. They were winged words, of undying import: "Mere democracy cannot solve the social question. An element of aristocracy must be introduced into our life. Of course, I do not mean the aristocracy of birth or of the purse, or even the aristocracy of intellect. I mean the aristocracy of character, of will, of mind. *That only can free us.* From two groups will this aristocracy I hope for come to our people—from our women and our workmen. The revolution in the social condition, now preparing in Europe, is

chiefly concerned with the future of the workers and the women. In this I place all my hopes and my expectations. For this I will work all my life and with all my strength."

A Norwegian once remarked to me that Ibsen is always asking questions—never answering them. "What would you have?" I replied again; "for otherwise Ibsen would not be Ibsen." And so it is. There must always come the unfinished note at the close; his plays must end with the note of interrogation, since a man cannot write away from himself and his most cherished convictions.

Another remarkable point to be noted is the wonderful impetus given to interest in Ibsen in a country like France by the publication of his latest works. Our Gallic friends, who are so rarely guilty of taking *anything* seriously, went absolutely wild over *Solness le Constructeur* and *Eyolf*.

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Their actors and actresses can act Ibsen too—with a difference. How amazingly amusing it was, to be sure, when the artists from the Comédie Française played *Rosmersholm* here, to find one of our best-accepted critics—whose French, by the way, must have been excessively shaky—describing the play as sounding “funny” in their language, and especially declaiming against the expression *les chevaux blancs de Rosmersholm*! Why? Presumably the meaning was that the translator could not reproduce the idiom. Granted; but “the white horses of Rosmersholm” is surely good enough for a public who have Viking blood in their veins.

How strangely strong is the *actable* quality of Ibsen’s work! Critics may and do bring what Mr. Archer picturesquely calls “the ’arf-brick of abuse,” but they signally fail, one and all, to take away from this wondrous quality. The author’s

easy dialogue and complete mastery of stage technique—this last he ought to possess, as Ole Bull's sometime stage-manager—stamp him at once as the *beau idéal* of a dramatic author; while he is correspondingly free from the reproach of using ordinary stage contrivances or devices. The conscientious and painstaking actor, intent on learning his own art, need not be an Ibsenite enthusiast to realize that every phrase and sentence of the pungent dialogue is telling.

"I admire Ibsen," Mr. Louis Calvert once said to me, "not for what he has done, but for what he could do if he only would."

"But then, if he wrote as you imply," I answered, "he would no longer *be* Ibsen."

In another place I make allusion to a more than harsh criticism of Ibsen occurring in Mr. Henry Arthur Jones's "Renaissance" book—a work which I venture to think has been read by few with more

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interest than by myself. The critic of a leading London paper rebuked Mr. Jones in the following very temperate and dignified terms: "It is years since any one with the slightest tincture of letters would have dreamt of applying to Ibsen an epithet which we decline to repeat. Mr. Jones should really keep abreast of the times, and not go babbling over the journalistic inanities of 1890 or thereabouts."

A troublesome admirer once had the temerity to ask Ibsen the "meaning" of a certain play. -

"What I have written I have written," replied the Master, fiercely.

In similar sense he has said elsewhere: "The State crushes Individuality; away with the State!" And over the grave of the historian Munch, in June, 1865, he declared: "States like ours cannot hold their own by material forces; but nations like ours can win the right to exist by

labouring for culture." Yes—Ibsen believes in Ibsen, whatever be the belief of the critical faculty, or of that which too often passes for the critical faculty.

"Hate a Frenchman as you hate the devil!" is attributed to Nelson. There be some who have taken up a similar attitude towards Ibsen—the poet whose last solemn word to us is: *Life is pitiless.*

CHAPTER IV.

THE NEW IBSEN.

THE attitude of contemporary British dramatists towards Ibsen would be amusing if it were not so lamentable. Mr. Henry Arthur Jones has said that "a strong, dirty man has written plays, and now every feeble dirty man thinks himself a dramatist."¹ Mr. Sydney Grundy has expressed to the present writer an opinion not less severe. At the time of the London production of *Hedda Gabler*, Mr. Robert Buchanan wrote: "For sheer unadulterated stupidity, for inherent meanness and vulgarity, for pretentious triviality . . . no Bostonian novel or London penny novelette has surpassed *Hedda Gabler*."

¹ "The Renascence of the English Drama," p. 340.

Yet what are the facts? In Mr. Henry Arthur Jones's brilliant but dead-failing play of *Michael and his Lost Angel*, the influence of Ibsen is more than plainly discernible. In Mr. Grundy's brilliant play, *The Greatest of These*, the whole of one act is practically nothing but Ibsen. In the case of Mr. Buchanan, at least one of his stage works may be said to have been permeated by the same influence. As for Mr. Pinero—whose attitude towards the Norwegian master is, however, considerably more tolerant—it is generally conceded that his *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* could scarcely have been written but for a similar overshadowing of the Norse spirit. And who told Agnes Ebbsmith to throw the Bible on the fire?

Ibsen's *Little Eyolf*, in three acts, published at the beginning of 1895, shows us our author in a new and, in several essentials, a less unquiet mood. Painful and

soul-stirring in the extreme, dealing as it does with the life and death of a little lame child, it yet brings to us a sense of rest at the last. For the first time we miss the note of interrogation with which these plays are wont to conclude. Resignation is the key-note of the last act; there is no such insistence upon will as we find in *Brand*; no such eternal cryings-out of self as we see in every page of *Peer Gynt*. If the end is not happiness, it at all events is peace. And yet the opening is stormy and perturbed enough. There are but half a dozen characters in *Little Eyolf*—and of these one is the child of Alfred and Rita Allmers, another the supposed half-sister of Allmers, and another the mostly symbolical and entirely unpleasant character of the Rat-wife. There is in addition the slight character of Borgheim in love with Asta. Of these six, Rita Allmers stands out in bold relief as the

creature of strong and all-absorbing passion. She was, as she herself confesses, fitted to *become* the mother of little Eyolf but not to *be* a mother to him. A fine distinction, perhaps, to the ordinary mind; but Ibsen abounds in such, and if he unflinchingly depicts Rita Allmers as one who disdains to go “drowsing about with fishes’ blood in her veins,” we feel that he is after all but depicting an ordinary type of womanhood and wifeness. There is an intensely powerful passage in which he paints an alarmingly characteristic situation between Rita and her less “vital” husband.

“*Allmers (gently)*: I will always go on caring for you, with quiet tenderness. (*He tries to take her hands.*)

“*Rita (avoiding him)*: I don’t care a bit for your quiet tenderness . . . I want you utterly and entirely—and alone! Just as I had you in the first rich beautiful days. . . (*Looking up at him with a veiled glow in her eyes.*) When I got your telegram yesterday evening——

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“ *Allmers* : Yes ? What then ?

“ *Rita* : Then I dressed myself in white——

“ *Allmers* : Yes, I noticed you were in white when I arrived.

“ *Rita* : I had let down my hair——

“ *Allmers* : Your sweet masses of hair——

“ *Rita* : So that it flowed down my neck and shoulders——

“ *Allmers* : I saw it—I saw it. Oh ! how lovely you were, Rita !

“ *Rita* : There were rose-tinted shades over both the lamps. And we were alone, we two—the only waking beings in the whole house. And there was champagne on the table.

“ *Allmers* : I didn't drink any of it.

“ *Rita* (*looking bitterly at him*) : No, that's true. (*Laughs harshly.*) ‘There stood the champagne, but you tasted it not ’—as the poet says.”

While Allmers' wife is in this unbeatific and unblissful state of unhealthy mind and unhealthy conscience, it can be readily understood that she is bitterly jealous even of their own child's love for Alfred and the latter's for him. There is another more than painful scene, in

which she expresses the awful wish that Eyolf had never been born, since he can come, if only slightly, between her and her devouring devotion to her husband. "It was in pain unspeakable," she says, "that I brought him into the world. But I bore it all with joy and rapture for your sake . . . But there it must end. I will live my life—together with you—wholly with you." And, again, there is a terrible re-criminatory passage between them, in which the one parent condemns the other for the lameness of Eyolf, saying that the accident could not have happened if they had not been so absorbed in their own passion, to the exclusion of all else.

Nemesis visits the unhappy twain in the swift sudden death of Eyolf by drowning. The little lad has been having a conversation with the fearsome Rat-wife, who describes to the child how she lures the rats, the "blessed little creatures,"

to their destruction. This she figures to the boy by explaining to him that "in the old days . . . I did the luring myself—I alone." To which wide-eyed Eyolf makes breathless rejoinder, "And what did you lure then?" "Men—one most of all," says the crone. "It was my own sweetheart, it was, little heart-breaker." But on Eyolf begging to be told "where was that one now?" she breaks in with the harsh reply, "Down where all the rats are." What Ibsen may or may not be figuring in this Rat-wife—who, it must be noted, is faithfully equipped with the "evil eye" complete—has vexed and perplexed many and many a critic and commentator. Of the various constructions put upon this unlovely but powerfully and wonderfully drawn character—not more of a *persona grâta* than are most of the subsidiary personages that one meets with in Ibsen—the idea of Mr. F. C. Constable strikes me as

both beautiful and appropriate. He has said, "Does not, then, the Rat-wife symbolize the action and justify the action of apparently cruel fate? Is it not suggested that fate, so apparently cruel, is from an unknown, merciful God? Accepting this view, it would appear that the fact of the Rat-wife having killed her sweetheart, and afterwards used the dog, symbolizes man's loss of past belief in fate as loving and loved, and his present belief in material chance. . . . The moral, I submit, is clear. Borgheim, engaged in public duty, is happy—the man living as God would have us live is simple and natural. Rita, self-involved in sensuous love; Alfred, self-involved in priggish personal ambition, are unhappy. When the two put before themselves work for duty, happiness glimmers before them; and perhaps—I do not wish to be brutal—work in the future has warmed Allmers and cooled Rita."

Nowhere else in contemporary literature is the very heart and core of parenthood probed with such earnestness, fearlessness, intensity, or extraordinary power as is the case in *Little Eyolf* by our maligned Norwegian. The little figure—a small life, be it remembered, that flickers out at the close of the first act, to the mournful cry, “The crutch is floating!”—upon which the very pith and kernel of the drama pivots, is one of singular felicity.¹ It was a master stroke to fill Eyolf’s brain with dreams of soldiering “when I grow big.” The tears come as we picture the frail, crippled little frame shouldering the crutch as he spiritedly says to his papa, “Ah, but when I grow big, then I shall have to be a soldier. You know that, don’t you?” There was the touch of an artist hand, too, in dressing Eyolf as a young soldier.

¹ This making the child’s death a central incident is reminiscent of *Brand*.

“All the best that’s in you goes into thinking,” exclaims Eyolf’s father to himself, in a fine outburst of self-reproach at his inability to settle to the work of his book on “Human Responsibility” as he would wish. “What you put on paper is worth very little,” he adds, with infinite pathos. The small world where he was environed by the burning fire of Rita’s passionate, jealous love on the one hand, by his own equation and his unsatisfied ideals on the other, was altogether too confined for a man of Allmers’ stamp. And in the last act of all, after he has confessed to Rita the hard bitter truth that he wooed her for the sake of her “gold and green forests,” he tells her of a day and a night that he once spent alone “in the heart of the great mountains.” There at least he could be content. The material husk, the lower range of life, had dropped away from him, and he was almost happy.

Thus and thus he speaks to his wondering wife—

“I came to a wide, dreary mountain-lake—and that lake I had to cross. But I could not, for there was neither a boat nor any one there. Then I went without any guidance into a side valley. I thought that by that way I could push on over the heights and between the peaks. . . . And at last I thought I should never see the face of man again. . . . I had no fear. Here went death and I, it seemed to me, like two good fellow-travellers. It all seemed so natural—so simple, I thought. In my family we don’t live to be old.”

In this wonderful piece of self-analysis, we scarcely need to be told what is the “lake” that Ibsen desires to figure to us. Note, too, Allmers’ guiding thought—that by that way he “could push on over the heights and between the peaks;” but it was of no avail. It may be cheaply said that it is crass foolishness to become too much entangled up in one’s own conscience. This is a fault, if a fault it be, commonest of all

with Ibsen's personages; but it is at the same moment a "fault" that humanizes and vitalizes them for us, and that therefore makes most of all for the peculiar beat of the pulse with which the reading and the representation of Ibsen affects us. "To be yourself is to lose yourself," as Peer Gynt has it.

The discovery, late in the play-story, that the girl Asta is not, as has been supposed, the half-sister of Allmers, is a master-stroke of construction. It is not dissimilar to the brilliantly daring stroke whereby Mr. Pinero—the learner from Ibsen, remember—introduces a new element into *Mrs. Tanqueray*, in the declaration of Ardale's former relations with the protagonist. The results are, however, widely dissimilar. For Asta and the self-communing, distracted, "wife-ridden" Allmers stand aghast at the dread knowledge that they love each other

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even as lovers love one another. Convention must have whispered in the author's ear, "Let them sin, and then drag in the Nemesis, an' it please you." Ibsen knows no conventions, however. He keeps Asta—a slight but perfect portrait in purity and womanliness—pure and holy to the end, and we have a vision of her going off to join her true lover, Borgheim, the engineer. But turbulent, wild-willed, exacting Rita Allmers is even now in the transition stage. Brought to a real and abiding knowledge, mixed with keenest remorse, of how criminally she has missed her responsibilities to Eyolf, she can at last see the inwardness of her husband's nature. He, stricken with anguish over the loss of the cripple boy on whom he had based so great hopes, more than ever turns towards the "quiet love" of which he has spoken to her before, is less than ever

inclined for her outbursts of uncontrolled—not uncontrollable—passion, and wildest, most selfish jealousy. “Our love has been like a consuming fire—now it must be quenched,” is his awful but calmly uttered dictum. At first Rita cannot believe or realize it. She wants, she demands, she must and will have life! life! life! full, complete, perfect, rapturous, “with the wild blood dancing.” Yes, and Ibsen spares not. It is Rita that is speaking to her sorrow-laden husband: “Do you remember it—that entrancingly beautiful hour, Alfred?”

“*Allmers (recoiling, as if in horror):* I remember nothing. I will not remember!

“*Rita (following him):* It was in that hour when your other little Eyolf was crippled for life!

“*Allmers (in a hollow voice, supporting himself against the table):* Retribution!

“*Rita (menacingly):* Yes; retribution!”

Yet for this strange pair it is reserved, at the eleventh hour, to rise on stepping-

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stones of their dead selves. As atonement, they say—or rather Allmers says, the wife catching the husband's enthusiasm only as he proceeds—they will get the poorest children out of the streets, and cause them to fill the aching void of Eyolf's loss. This shall be their mission—the woman's burden, the man's endurance. And here it is that we quit them. “All or nothing” it is to be for them now—even as it had been with Agnes. With her, indeed, well might the stricken, repentant wife of Alfred Allmers exclaim that—

She knows the call
Of either *Nothing* or else *All*.

CHAPTER V.

AN IBSEN SOCIETY DEMANDED : MR. BEERBOHM
TREE.

WE who run and read are faced at the outset by an exceedingly complex and interesting problem, or series of problems, as advanced by Ibsen. In the same way that the two elements known as "haste" and "speed" are as widely sundered as the South is from that North Pole which Ibsen's gallant countryman has been striving to attain, so surely is the receptive faculty of the average reading mind palpably parted from the brain-state in which one should sit down to bring the Norwegian dramatist's abstract ideas into closer union with one's own ideas. It is

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easy to feel, and easier to say, that a man's argument is poverty-stricken because it fails to convince yourself; but when he follows up his advance by an affair of outposts, and then by an assault in force, you begin to fancy, provided you be moderately honest and well-intentioned, that he is entitled to something more than a mere reconnaissance with firing at long range.

So is it with Ibsen. While some are asking as to his teaching, and others as to his preaching, other some still vaguely wonder, "What is his mission, and what does he seek to show?" The answer to each of these questions implies the putting of a fresh query, until he who approaches the Ibsen book-shelf in much the same spirit as he has heretofore approached the book-shelves dedicated, say, to Mill, Carlyle, or Emerson, cries aloud that he knows not what is this plague that has fallen upon him. He

sees Ibsen in a glass darkly, and the glass is very, *very* dark. How to let in the light! He gropes further and further, stumbling and falling he knows not whither, until he cries out again, and yet more loudly, that the works of this author are gross, undesirable, and fitted not to live.

That saying is the mark of the natural man.

Speaking for myself, I do not subscribe to the common impression that Ibsen is "symbolizing" from end to end of his dramatic output. Partly, no doubt, on account of his strict and systematic avoidance of stage conveniences and contrivances—partly by reason of the inherent simplicity and straightforwardness of the stories that he unfolds—it has been assumed that he utilizes every opportunity to indulge in figurative aspects of life and death. Why should he do so? The great majority of his characters, as middle-class as are the

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characters of Mr. George Gissing, and drawn straight from "Scandinavia in its sordid suburbanism," are intensely and essentially human beings. Shakespeare boldly takes for his types kings and the rulers of princes, seeming only to rest satisfied when exposing the vices and frailties, or appreciating the virtues, of the high ones of the land. Ibsen, on the contrary, deals in everyday, ordinary incidents and aspects, concealing nothing because he has nothing to conceal. About the highest rank that he reaches in the social scale is the daughter of a general officer; and she is made to stand out from the figures grouped around her, just as her father may be supposed to have shone among his grenadiers. She is, in short, the exception that goes to prove the rule, country physicians, well-to-do artisans, and their wives and daughters, being the types invariably depicted.

It is admissible, however, to go considerably further than the very ordinary assertion that Ibsen is a maker of great and living plays. I am distinctly of opinion that he is a maker of actors. For he is endowed in an extraordinary degree with the faculty of writing acceptable acting parts, parts which the player cannot help but *feel*, and therefore cannot help but render plausible. This fact, for fact it undoubtedly is, applies to the majority of lesser as well as greater Ibsenite characters. Take Brack in *Hedda Gabler*, Rank in *A Doll's House*, the girl "Kaia" in *The Master-Builder*, and (for the sake of comparison) the gruesome figure of the old Rat-wife in *Little Eyolf*. Each is a gem of characterization, and we never find this dramatist guilty of the grave fault of repeating himself in his characters. It is a virtue not possessed by all.

If invited to say which of his social plays I take to be the best adapted to stage

representation, I should probably reply *A Doll's House*. And in so deciding I should speak with a very open mind indeed, rather than as a partisan swayed by a special and absorbing interest in any one play. The sad story of the toy-wife and of Krogstad contains every one of the elements that make for a genuine stage triumph. Plot, action, and diction alike fit themselves to the exigencies of the life "behind the foot-lights." Indeed, the difference between reading and witnessing these plays is astonishing. *Ghosts* I have only had the privilege of reading, and can truthfully say that it made a deep and lasting impression upon my mind. But the "imaginative faculty" in Ibsen is surely the most fully and subtly developed in his *Master-Builder*. In a lecture delivered at the Royal Institution in May, 1893, Mr. Beerbohm Tree took occasion to say, in relation to this very imaginative quality when evolved out of the

uncongenial soil of Scandinavia, "All the more wonderful is it that the magician should have been able to conjure up from this dank soil, which would appear congenial only to mushroom growth, such wondrous and variegated plants. In witnessing this play we are moved by its power, we are fascinated by its originality. Few fail to feel the thud of its pulse. Each weaves his own version of its message. The master has gained his end; he has stirred the imagination of his audience, he alone remains sphinx-like, unexplained; he is the artist—wise master!"

In conversation with me on the subject of this same play of *The Master-Builder*, Mr. Tree confessed that he was not seriously struck with its representation on his first visit to the theatre; and he added:

"Perhaps at that moment the brain and mind may have been divorced from the matter in hand by some counter-influence suggested by the

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auditor's own affairs. However this may have been, I distinctly recollect coming away from the theatre on the second occasion feeling much more than 'deeply impressed' by all that I had seen and heard. So much depends upon the frame of mind, that I shall even venture to crave forgiveness for having, when first I witnessed *Die Meistersinger* (it was in London), all but dropped off to sleep. Yet, singularly, on the second time of seeing it, at Bayreuth, I felt its magnetism more deeply, and in a greater variety of ways, than can be expressed in words. It then appealed to me, and stirred my cordial emotions to their very depths, in just as great degree as it had failed to do so before; and I could cite other instances of the same kind. But one's mind becomes convoluted, and on these first occasions my battery was certainly not responsive to the electric power wielded by the master-brain of either Wagner or Ibsen—was not, so to speak, in a condition to be acutely swayed by the picturesque grandeur of the Nuremberg singing or the weird fantasies indulged by the inexplicable Halvard Solness and his 'girl from Lysanger.'"

Another word upon the question of Realism *versus* Idealism. Henrik Ibsen is the artist: he creates, and it is not necessary

for him to produce anything savouring of the self-conscious. To symbolize is the work of the commentator, not of the artist, and the one frequently lacks the imagination with which the other is gifted. The artist must get his effect at all cost. Whether he subscribe to letters, art, the stage, or politics, this must be the case. Perhaps the story of Mr. Frank Holl and the bishop illustrates best the difficulty that will sometimes beset the artist when striving for an effect which he feels positive is lurking in the vicinity, but which is still unattained. His sitter heard Mr. Holl using certain striking words. "I wish you would not use such language," quoth the bishop. "I am not swearing at your lordship," replied the painter, aggrievedly, "but at this d——d picture." And when it comes, this long longed-for effect—if it is going to be a masterpiece—comes simply, solidly, with no blare of trumpets, no mere *aids* to effective-

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ness. For have not the most tuneful poems ever penned, the finest pictures ever painted, the greatest inventions ever given to the world, been distinguished by this quality of simplicity? One notices that the same characteristics often overshadow the lives of many great men. But the gift of thinking with the author whose imaginative work is unfolded before you—of thinking with him in every phase of thought and every direction in which he wills that you should follow him—is indisputably essential to a right interpretation of the whole.

So much has been said and written in regard to the difficulty of “comprehending” Ibsen’s work, that the ordinary thinking mind will without any difficulty recall that it is not unprecedented in this country to form a literary society with the avowed object of conducting investigations into the “inner transcendentalism” of the works of a living author! Artemus Ward, it will be

recollected, tells of a painter who at long last was constrained to admit that the object which he had immortalized on canvas was "a horse." Well, why not an Ibsen Society, primarily formed, if you will, for the purpose of "discovering" the true trend of that genius of which so many have acquired a mistaken notion? This can scarcely be called a "plea" for an Ibsen Society, seeing that we live in a state of "society" which is nothing *but* Societies. England has its Shakespeare, Byron, Browning, and other societies; while America cherishes, unless I am mistaken, its Walt Whitman Society. - It may be objected that Ibsen is not an English author. The manifest reply is that in a community where thousands of copies of that *Master-Builder*, which is also his masterpiece, were disposed of in a few months, the interest in the Norwegian dramatist's work is far greater than in any other European country

excepting his own—an interest that has only been fanned by the fierce controversy waged around his name. It was the persistent hurling, from the very first, of this frenzy of execration (as Mr. Archer happily calls it) at the dramatist's devoted head, that largely inspired, as it subsequently deepened, my interest in him. *Ghosts*, one of his most vivid and deep-reaching pictures, had been published, and already it was bruited abroad that such writings were equally injudicious and pernicious. In some directions these epithets are still applied to the same man and in the same manner. In France, where the interest in Ibsen's work has grown with their growth, perhaps there already is an Ibsen Society such as the one suggested for this country. If in France, how much the more in England! Madame Bernhardt, herself a delightful Ibsen impersonator, has said that we English take his plays, like other plays

and other things, too seriously. If so, then it is all the more remarkable that these dramas should, to employ a cheap phrase, have "caught on" among our Gallic cousins to such an extraordinary extent! Their reviews and magazines, equally with ours, have been full of Ibsenite essays and the opinions of many. It is true, too, that their recent Drama has been palpably influenced by the same cause that has influenced our own, though possibly to a less extent. We go further south, and it is the same. Not long since I was reading Echegaray's *A Son of Don Juan*, and was struck by its close resemblance to *Ghosts*. It was palpable that the Figure from the North had played upon the Spanish author, as he had played upon the French and English ones, and the reader could not help regarding this work as another tribute to Ibsen's genius. To say, then, that he has influenced and is influencing the contem-

porary drama enormously, is to record a very ordinary truth. It would be folly to attempt to depreciate that influence—an influence, as I firmly believe, for good, and not for evil. But let me again quote from Mr. Beerbohm Tree's remarks to myself:

“It may seem strange that *An Enemy of the People*, differing so markedly from the other social plays, should be the one Ibsen production yet presented upon the Haymarket stage. It is not to be supposed that German actors or German commentators are more exact and infallible than those of other countries; but I enjoyed the privilege of seeing *An Enemy of the People* played in Germany by a German company, and played exceedingly well. The story of the man whose idea of beauty to his native town leads to results so peculiar, again appealed to my instincts and emotions; and the subsequent production in London was more successful than could have been anticipated. It was noticeable, moreover, that the performers themselves quickly became interested, even fascinated—in some instances, it may be, in spite of themselves. So forcible, so straightforward was it as to claim their respect at the same time that it enchained their attention.”

Great in himself, Ibsen may be said to be the cause of greatness in others. His power of characterization is so vivid and spontaneous that the actor can hardly go astray.

In America they are, on the whole, not yet "ready" for Ibsen. It is true that America has given us one of the most graceful among Ibsenite actresses, but this is only another of the exceptions. It is true also that in Chicago—of all places!—*An Enemy of the People* made a deeper impression than any of the "legitimate" pieces presented by Mr. Tree on that tour. Nevertheless, in the United States the general attitude of the intelligent multitude towards the Norwegian is one of indifference. That is to say, not from the standpoint that there is anything about his work peculiarly calling for avoidance, but because it is not the kind of mental pap on which they have been weaned, or towards

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which they can be pointed without applying the spur. So that in America, where exigencies and susceptibilities do not often admit stage heroines of the Tess type, the spur is waiting to be applied. They do not refuse to listen to him, but they do not wish to be made aware of his coming.

Then we have the question of the moral and the immoral. You can no more assert that Ibsen's tendency is not "good" than you can seriously say that the tendency of Greek tragedy is improper. It is terrible, if you like—so is Ibsen, sometimes. The bent of him can be so lofty as to irritate the mind of the average spectator. "I am a poet," says Ibsen's countryman Björnson, "not because I write verse—so many people can do that—but because *all that concerns humanity concerns me.*" Björnson merely repeats what the greater poet has been saying throughout his life. "All that concerns humanity" is the comprehensive "all"

that concerns Ibsen. He is the poet of "the sere, the yellow leaf." And how little do we know about the real Ibsen! We know that the political feud so long existent between the houses of Ibsen and Björnson was happily ended by the marriage of the former's son to the latter's daughter. We know that his first play, the historical *Catalina*, was produced at Christiania forty-five years ago, when he was only twenty-two. We know that he drifted away from his native land, and that in 1866 the Storthing pensioned him. These, and details like these, are of the baldest and most trivial, his biographers never seeming to pierce the veil that conceals the true Ibsen. The true Ibsen is indeed a wondrous complexity. I would even go the length of suggesting that Scandinavia was created that Ibsen might be! For Scandinavia is a troublous place, designed, as it were, for turbulent folk. Again, "What is

this man's religion?" ask some. "He has none," reply others, with a sweep of the eyebrows and a snort of contempt. I submit that Ibsen's creed is that of the artist. He does not question, he does not doubt; but, as Whistler said of Leighton, "he paints." He is *only* the painter—and the painter may depict a Madonna without being absolutely convinced that his model is immaculate. If the author of *Little Eyolf* be not an earnest religionist, how are the closing words of that fine play explained away?

CHAPTER VI.

THE THREE GROUPS.

FREIDRICH NIETZSCHE has said of Wagner that he "immeasurably increased the speaking-power of Music." May it not be similarly said of Ibsen that he has immeasurably increased the speaking-power of the Drama? The comparison is, I submit, an apt one. For just as Wagner plays upon the highest emotions, the deepest sensibilities, by the power of *his* art, so does Ibsen interpret them by means of his. Both masters demonstrate to us—so fully—the difference between *dramatic* and *theatrical* effect.

It is observable, upon the other hand, that Miss Marie Corelli "hates William

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Archer and his god Ibsen." It is scarcely likely that my cultured acquaintance, Mr. William Archer, will sink and die under the weight of this gifted, but unfortunately prejudiced, authoress's harsh criticism. Like unto "his god Ibsen," the brilliant translator and erudite man of letters is by this time fully inured to the tribulations inflicted by the wordy weapons of the unjust and the uninformed. The term "uninformed" is here employed in the converse sense to "misinformed," in the same way that one speaks of Ibsen's teachings as unmoral—a far different thing to the *im*moral. But Max Norda and Marie Corelli have spoken !

Mr. Havelock Ellis divides the plays into three groups, for convenience' sake. These groups are: (1) historical and legendary dramas; (2) dramatic poems; (3) social dramas. Of the first division it is unnecessary to say more than a passing word,

albeit I claim to be an enthusiastic student of them all. They are little known in this country, and it is not by them that any widespread fame has been won by their author. First of all we have *Catalina*, dating back to 1850, and marred, it must be owned, by much of youthfulness and inexperience, without the faintest, or more than the very faintest, promise of the stronger and so different work to follow. Second, we have *Lady Inger of Ostraüt*, in which the still young pen of Ibsen exhibits considerable mastery of technique in a melodramatic field. *The Feast of Solhang*, whose argument takes us back into the fourteenth century, is practically unknown in this country. *The Vikings at Helgeland* and *The Pretenders* contain some splendid work. In the one, Ibsen sings, or rather speaks, the Saga of the Volsung, which in our own land William Morris has put to such noble use,—and this, too, is of

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remarkable interest in the light of the fact that, nearly thirty years afterwards, Ibsen returns to the Viking theme when he makes Solness remark to Hilda that "those fellows must have had 'robust consciences,' if you like." (Hilda opines that "that must have been thrilling." "What, to carry off women, as the Vikings did?" demands Halvard. "No, to *be* carried off!") *The Pretenders* excited a great deal of comment, partly because at that time (1864) Denmark was being humbled by the rising military greatness of Prussia, and Ibsen did not scruple to apply the perils and controversies of the Norse period of which he wrote to current politics. *Emperor and Galilean* is better known here than either of the above-named. It is of great length, and in it, as the title denotes, Ibsen takes us to old Rome, where he works out a tragedy—that of Julian the Apostate—more stupendous, even more prolonged, than

Shakespeare's *Henry VI.* It occurs to the writer, in passing, that it would be just as reasonable to accuse Mr. Wilson Barrett of having pirated *Emperor and Galilean* for the purposes of his *The Sign of the Cross* as it is to bring against Ibsen the baseless charges that have been brought. And Mr. Barrett is not an Ibsenite !

In his second group Mr. Havelock Ellis places but three productions—*Brand*; the weird, introspective, and enormously powerful *Peer Gynt*; and another dramatic poem, *Love's Comedy*, written (1862) presumably before Ibsen had gained the greater strength requisite for *Brand*. In *Love's Comedy*, Ibsen for the first time satirizes himself and all around him. For this, and for the lightness of touch employed, the piece is principally noteworthy. It should have, but has not, a reading vogue in England. As much as it instances anything, it instances the author's versatility.

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Turn we now to the third group indicated for us by Mr. Ellis. These now number, roughly speaking, a dozen, and it may be well to set out their titles together with the dates of their publication:—

<i>The League of Youth</i>	...	...	1869
<i>The Pillars of Society</i>	...	...	1877
<i>A Doll's House</i>	...	...	1879
<i>Ghosts</i>	...	...	1881
<i>An Enemy of the People</i>	...	...	1882
<i>The Wild Duck</i>	...	...	1884
<i>Rosmersholm</i>	...	...	1886
<i>The Lady from the Sea</i>	...	...	1888
<i>Hedda Gabler</i>	...	...	1890
<i>The Master-Builder</i>	...	...	1892
<i>Little Eyolf</i>	...	...	1894
<i>John Gabriel Borkman</i>	...	...	1896

Most of these are fully discussed on other pages of this appreciation, both by myself and by my collaborator. In the first on the list, Ibsen takes up the cause of Young Norway in no laggard or niggardly spirit, and with a fearlessness

that in his own country even then found him many admirers and supporters. At first, though, it did not gain a fair hearing upon the stage. Still, when the poet visited Norway, in 1874, ten years after his voluntary self-exile, he was received with the wildest enthusiasm at a public performance of *The League of Youth*. In *The Pillars of Society*, where the dramatist begins to inveigh against the evils and the torments of life as ordinarily lived, in a kind of advanced Tennysonian stage—

(“Cursed be the social wants that sin against the strength of youth !

Cursed be the social lies that warp us from the living truth !

Cursed be the sickly forms that err from honest Nature’s rule !

Cursed be the gold that gilds the straiten’d forehead of the fool !”)

—my friend Sir Edward Russell thinks that he finds the most human female character in the whole of Ibsen. Be this

as it may, *The Pillars of Society* (a good translation, by the way, of the bitingly satirical title of *Samfundets Støtter*) is a milestone, and a sufficiently noteworthy one, upon the steep road which the author has climbed. In *The Lady from the Sea* we meet with the young girl whom Ibsen subsequently develops into the Hilda of *The Master-Builder*. This questionable practice of repeating a personage in a later work is not often indulged in by Ibsen: he does it, however, with great effectiveness in *An Enemy of the People*, where he reintroduces the printer Aslaksen whom we have already encountered in *The League of Youth*—a perfect portrait of a time-serving knave. This *Enemy of the People* is one of the three or four “plays from the North” that have been accorded full justice upon the English stage. The lights and shades of Dr. Stockmann’s sturdy, resolute, lovable per-

sonality are sketched in with extraordinary insight and consummate naturalness. "D—— the compact majority!" exclaims the irate "enemy" of his native town, as he sees his plans for the betterment of his fellows killed by municipal backslidings and the self-serving abuses of the Town Council's "majority." Stockmann will not poison, or consent to have poisoned, the little town that his skill, energy, and large-heartedness have helped to build and make grow. Therefore he is hounded from the place, his windows broken, himself subjected to mob-violence. What does he reply to his critics, as the curtain descends? "No man is so strong as he who stands most alone!" May we, any of us, deserve it!—for the words come straight from the plucky doctor's heart. There is no symbolism here: it is the plain straightforward story of an everyday, ordinary creature, who was brave as he

was just, poor as he was honest. This work "stands alone" even as its central character does, and the humour of it is unique.

Rosmersholm is another eminently actable play. We read it to its close with a mingling and tingling of sensations. At the last word of the last page we lay it down with a shudder. "Rosmer of Rosmersholm" and Rebecca West have gone into the mill-race, locked in one another's arms—the inexorable "white horses of Rosmersholm" have engulfed them, and we hold our breath as we seem to hear Rebecca's final, stifled shriek as she yields herself to the cold cruel waters. There is no sin, or suggestion of sinning, here. It is true that the fear of sinning, and the horror of it, have been before Rebecca's eyes: and now, when both are free, she cannot bear to accept the love that is to her—as she proves by

her death—more than life or the hereafter. Grim with a great grimness is the tragedy ; but Rebecca's is a nature that forces her into a consummation that she feels to be the only way out. It is death or madness — and in choosing the former, does she not take the next best thing to life as she understands it ?

In *Ghosts*, many a man finds the embodiment of himself and of his own past. "The sins of the fathers"—these are what live over again as "ghosts." They are not mere phantoms or phantasies. They are those eerie "again-goers"—*gengangarde*, as the Norse tongue has it—whose tremulous forms are beheld of men while the world is quietening into shadowland. *Ghosts* should have—and I, for one, firmly believe that it has—effected a great moral and social good. Ibsen did not fear to exploit a subject not previously treated in terms acceptable to the society of lie and tradition

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and convention. Occasionally it is horrible, but how vivid, how far-reaching, how marvellously analytical! There was hostility towards Ibsen from Norway herself upon its publication in 1881, but not for long. Now his countrymen kiss his feet where once they doubted and condemned; and the special train that conveyed the manuscript of one of his later works* to the publishers was garlanded by the affectionate hands of numerous adherents.

I should like to reproduce here some words of a distinguished Ibsenite actor, Mr. Herbert Waring, in describing to me his sensations on a first acquaintance with *A Doll's House* :—

“ At about eleven p.m. on a hot night in early summer I began to read the play, and I remember the sense of ineffable weariness which oppressed me when I laid the book aside for a moment at

* *The Master-Builder*, I believe.

the end of the first act. At this time, I am ashamed to say, Ibsen was hardly even a name to me. I had heard vague rumours of a Scandinavian dramatist who could never be popular in this country, but who had already found an eloquent apostle in the person of one of our most erudite and discriminating critics. I had, I am afraid, taken but little notice of these reports, being possibly more interested in my own progress than in the advancement of the drama.

“Where on earth, I thought, could any man, much less a thoughtful critic or an aspiring manager, discover any merit in this bald and trivial piece? The childish inanities of the Helmer *ménage*, the intolerably tedious conversation between Nora and Mrs. Linden, the priggish morality of the commonplace husband, the primitive frivolity of the macaroon-eating wife, the uncomfortable self-revelation of the doctor, whom I already resolved to discard (my choice lay between Rank and Helmer), could these things have any dramatic purport, feebly illuminated, as they were, by the dullest and most prosaic dialogue? It is true that the figure of Krogstad already stood out in bold and most welcome relief, as a strong and dominant character, and the scene between him and Nora was not dramatically uninteresting; so there was some

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very slight stimulus to continue the reading of the play.

“The second act I found a little more interesting. There was more life and movement in it. The episode of the tarantella was fairly exciting, and Nora’s desperate position contained some element of tragic import. The extraordinary scene between Nora and Rank increased my aversion to the latter gentleman, and I was quite determined that no quantity of wild horses should drag me on to the stage in his unhappy and revolting person. But I approached the third act with no very sanguine feelings. Of course the crash would come as it always came, the husband whom the author had not idealism enough to make a decent Jew would take the onus on himself, Krogstad would retire in discomfiture, and the drama would hasten to its very obvious and commonplace *finale*.

“I finished the play with very mixed sensations. I was irritated at the failure of my own confident prognostications, puzzled by the unconventional *dénouement*, and uneasily impressed by the dawning conviction that I had treated lightly something which was very great indeed. I read the play straight through a second time into the small hours of the morning, with a degree of interest and excitement which I can honestly say I have never before or since experienced, either in the

perusal or representation of any play. Every monosyllable in the terse and pungent dialogue opened up a fresh thought or revealed some hidden depth of character; and there, whether for good or ill, whether its effects might be ennobling or debasing, was a complete and well-made play, constructed with masterly ingenuity, and teeming with vital human interest. Nevertheless, the piece was rehearsed by the company with no very sanguine feelings, and the ordinary terrors of a first night's performance were no doubt accentuated by the unconventional nature of the experiment. In spite, however, of the preponderance of hostile criticism, which ranged from downright condemnation to the faintest of faint praise, the new drama proved undeniably attractive; and from that time the name of Ibsen has been, more or less, a name to conjure with."

Note, too, the fine portraiture always employed when Ibsen wishes to introduce to us a clerical or religious personage, whether as protagonist or merely subsidiary. Are they ever stagey conventions, are they ever caricatures or colourless, these priests? Never. They are invariably equipped with

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a definite *raison d'être* in the working-out of the play-scheme proper, and consequently they rarely jar. But, take Ibsen through and through, I do not fancy that you will find many of his characters who have not a definite, if not always a sympathetic, mission. He is not like Björnson, "never too far in advance of his fellows." As Mr. Havelock Ellis would say, Ibsen stands alone "in the darkness in front." But alone he *does* stand. "Alone" he is destined to die, as he has lived. But he will never die out. The motto of the Cardinal de Rohan might well be his: "*Je ne puis Roi, je ne daigne Prince, je suis—Ibsen.*"

CHAPTER VII.

THE LATEST PLAY.

I.

IBSEN has not lost his grip. It is as strong as ever in the drama called *John Gabriel Borkman* after the principal character; and John Gabriel Borkman is an idealized Jabez Balfour. Perhaps this does injustice to Jabez Balfour, for he may have had ideas as enthusiastic and lofty as John Borkman had. Let it not be supposed that because the hero of the play is a broken-down financier there is no female interest. Perhaps this would be an unsafe assumption even in the Balfour case. Those who had the task of going through the papers of Jabez are said to have found

evidence that the versatility of that remarkable man had developments of a kind quite remote from unsentimental business. In the case of Borkman there is no suggestion of any general weakness on the erotic side of the character. The probabilities as suggested by the play are against such an idea. But there are two women interested in Borkman—two women who have “fought a life-and-death battle for his soul,” and though the renewed struggle in the actual play is very perfunctory, and is complicated and deranged by another woman with whom Borkman is not concerned, the interest created and sustained by the love aspect of the man’s life is powerful, and its working is very subtle. If a theory were to be propounded on the subject, it would probably be that while his love affairs had little weight with his will, they had a great effect upon his destiny. His wife, whatever she may have been at

an earlier period, is now perfectly rigid, regarding the conduct of her husband as unpardonable, and cherishing no hope except that of bringing up her son to reinstate the honour of the name. A much more interesting character is this wife's sister, who really loves John Gabriel Borkman, and does not know why he preferred her sister.

The scene in which this phenomenon is explained reveals curious depths of character. The phenomenon occurred, not as so many things of the kind occur, by caprice or accident, but through a distinct subordination of the financier's duty as a lover to the supposed necessities of his ambition. If the play has a moral, it is that a man who thus trifles with love is likely to pay heavy penalties that do not seem germane to the sorrows of love, either successful or unsuccessful. Borkman, though sufficiently under the influence of his affection

to reserve the property of the one who is dearest to him from the general submersion and loss of all the other property entrusted to him, bears the loss of this dearest one with scarcely chequered philosophy. His love, however, in spite of his selling it for a worldly advantage, brings upon him calamities which he cannot regard with philosophy—the calamities of ruin, in fact. And while his wife is about him utterly unforgiving, and he is pacing his living-room brooding over hopeless projects for his rehabilitation, he is confronted by the woman who would have borne all adversities by his side, and will still, but who charges him upon his own testimony with the greatest of crimes—the destruction of the love-life of another human being. It is curious how consistently the ruined man is all but indifferent to the agony of the once-loved, perhaps still-loved, woman who is all devotion to him, and who certainly

has no rival in his heart. When, after a struggle has taken place between the two sisters for the possession and control of Borkman's son, this young man is carried off from both of them by a very wanton lady, who echoes his own clamours for a pleasant and independent life, Borkman, in that fashion of roaming upwards into the mists and snows which is Ibsen's most frequent expression of bewildered consciousness and erratic will, conducts Ella, the sister-in-law, up to a height where, in the days of early courtship, they used to survey the prospect, and there, while the sad woman recalls their old imaginings—as she thought, of love—he recalls them as occupied solely with the business of material wealth. “It was the dreamland of our life,” says she, “and now that land is buried in snow, and the old tree is dead.” But he sees ships, and fancies the treasures in the depths of mines.

The ships "come and go. They weave a network of fellowship all round the world. They shed light and warmth over the souls of men in many thousands of homes. That was what I dreamed of doing." So that it is possible for a Borkman to have great dreams of practical philanthropy, though he may be capable of felony in the process ; and though he can be indifferent to the spiritual wealth of love, he loves the wealth of the mines he had hoped to work, "loves them unborn as they lie yearning for the light with all their shining train of power and glory." He "loves them, loves them, loves them"—and then dies.

I have hazarded a guess that this play will not excite so much animosity in England as others of the author. And those who are free from prepossession will acknowledge it to be a fine and tragic performance, ploughing deep into true human experience. But there are two

passages which may fairly excite disgust. They are difficult to criticize. In one the financier, when he is considering in retrospect the loss he made of the woman he really loved, remarks that one woman would have done afterwards as well as another. This is an outrage on feeling. Is it not an exaggeration even of any feeling Borkman could possibly have had? If so, it is contrary to art, because offensively departing from truth. In the other case, a lady of very light character, though not previously actually of ill life, takes away a young girl with her in eloping, and suggests that she will serve for her own lover to fall back upon when tired of her. This is terribly foul, and surely not less foolish; for what woman would say such a thing, even if we can conceive a woman feeling it? A suggestion such as this is more offensive than passages of supposed indelicacy which have been objected to

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in some of the other plays. Ibsen holds a rank which keeps dogmatism aloof as to anything that he deliberately puts into his dialogue; but it is difficult to avoid concluding that the detail to which we have objected is as improbable as it is unpleasant. Happily, the great structure and purport of the piece, while full of pessimism as to actualities, is full of optimism in its ideals, and its harrowing enactment of morally ruined mature lives, and of an immature life lightly ruining itself, is in the highest and best spirit of teaching by examples to avoid.

The theme has a nearer relation to common life than has been found in previous plays of Ibsen, which were busy mainly with what to people who suppose themselves healthy appear to be mere whimsies of a diseased sentimentalism. There is a whimsy quality in *John Gabriel Borkman*, and almost all of its sentiment is

diseased. "Healthy" people, however, are less annoyed and more interested in phenomena of this kind when they arise out of such adventures and experiences as those of an ambitious, ruined company-promoter, than when they seem to come more directly from gratuitously indulged, morbid idiosyncrasy.

Any one who wishes for a purely dramatic sensation may have it by reading the first scene with the last scene of the play, where Borkman dies broken-hearted in the snow.

With consummate art the action of the play is limited to one evening, and whatever revelation is necessary is achieved almost without narrative, and made vividly clear because of the intense bearing of the past upon the present in almost all the characters.

The touches in which Borkman discriminates, according to his callous idea,

between a man's and a woman's attitude towards love; and perceives how one may act in faith and unfaith at once (as he in reference to Ella's property), and with a fatuous grossness, which she promptly exposes, pronounces that one woman will do as well as another; are among the strongest things in modern drama.

There is an incident in the last act, which alone in this play is likely to evoke that disgust which in reference to Ibsen lies so near the surface of the average English mind. It is on this wise: When Borkman's son, in the favourite Norwegian cant, as it seems, declares his intention of "living his life,"—that is to say, of frankly eloping with a married woman seven years his senior,—it has also been arranged by the eloping young matron that they shall be accompanied by a young girl to whom young Borkman has been very kind, and who is the daughter

of his father's old friend. When Erhart's mother hears this she smiles a knowing smile in the midst of her mortification. In spite of her hardness, she is a woman of real as well as imperious dignity, but, as with many hard people, her ideas are coarse. And so she smiles significantly at the thought of the young girl accompanying the eloping couple. Strangely and audaciously the aërial matron, being a philosopher in her kind—a sort of flighty Madame de Warens—fully justifies Mrs. Borkman's sardonic suggestion, which, with another malignant smile, the latter puts into words—

“*Mrs. Borkman (with a malignant smile):* Mrs. Wilton, do you think you are acting quite wisely in taking that girl with you?

“*Mrs. Wilton (returning the smile, half-ironically, half-seriously):* Men are so unstable, Mrs. Borkman. And women too. When Erhart is done with me—and I with him—then it will be well

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for us both that he, poor fellow, should have some one to fall back upon.

“*Mrs. Borkman* : But you yourself ?

“*Mrs. Wilton* : Oh, I shall know what to do, I assure you. Good-bye to you all !

[*She bows and goes out by the hall door.*

Erhart stands for a moment as though wavering ; then he turns and follows her.”]

This is, morally, the worst thing in the play.

I am not attempting to tell the whole story in its subtle intertwinings and its incidental heightenings—as in the old friend being nearly run over by the closed sleigh in which his young daughter is being carried on her dubious journey—some of which heightenings may be regarded, if one pleases, as bits of that Ibsen symbolism which is always on the border-line of Ibsen accident. In the *dénouement* Borkman, pretty well demented, wanders with the one woman who has loved him, and the one woman whom he

has come near loving, up a hill, amid the snow, on to a ridge, whence he can see the prospect most closely associated with his unbounded ambition and his narrowly bounded love. There he dies, and there the twin-sisters, wife and sister-in-law, join hands, "two shadows, over the dead man."

E. R. R.

II.

It is a harrowing, pitiful story, down to the last line of the final page. If Halvard Solness succeeded in erecting for himself a tower of one kind—by dint of building upon others—so did John Gabriel Borkman for *himself* a tower of another sort. The financier builds for himself and those to come after him a veritable heritage of shame. He is a sordid pilferer—that is the plain Saxon of it. And yet even in him we see the workings of a burning desire to get outside of himself and to *be* great—

according to his lights. To the last he had dreams of a great golden empire, to be founded by him—by the financier once so great that men spoke his name as a household word, referring to John Gabriel familiarly, as one would to a favourite statesman or commander. What a fall was his!—and to die 'mid the snow-wreaths at the last.

Paradoxical though it sounds, however, his crime of embezzlement and forgery, his great sin against the criminal and moral laws, did not constitute the ex-convict's central crime. Ibsen is explicit upon this point. "I feel," says Borkman, "like a Napoleon who has been maimed in his first battle." Just so: those sins might perhaps have been forgiven him—if not here, hereafter. But this is what Borkman has done, and it is Ella Rentheim—the woman who should have been his wife—who is his accuser:

“You have killed the love-life in me. Do you understand what that means? The Bible speaks of a mysterious sin for which there is no forgiveness.¹ I have never understood what it could be, but now I understand. *The great, unpardonable sin is to murder the love-life in a human soul.*”

This is, in my judgment, the most powerful, as it is the most terrible and most accusatory, bit of writing in the book. “To murder the *love-life* in a human soul.” As coming from so great a master, we must respect Ibsen’s curious interpretation of the “mysterious sin” of which the Bible darkly whispers. Borkman murdered the love-life in Ella Rentheim’s soul when he “sold her love for a directorship.” He seems to have weighed the two—his love for her and his love for power and gold—and the lust of might and power won over love for the true woman. For Ella, we are well assured, loved him so well that she would have done and dared all for his sake,

¹ The German censor expunged this passage.

and would have "stood at his side when the crash came." This scene is one of the most memorable and painful to be found in the whole range of dramatic authorship. They are the accuser and the accused—she the true woman, dying by inches but faithful unto death; he the still caged wolf, freed from his prison-fetters but never to feel free again. If his own case has been hard, though so doubly deserved his punishment, how does his suffering compare with hers? Some of *his*, perhaps much of it, has been endured in a sub-conscious state, not actively *seeing* the whole of his own punishment; but with her it is all so different. She is the woman—and in the long run the woman pays. "You have done to death," she says, "all the gladness of life in me. From the day when your image began to dwindle in my mind, I have lived my life as though under an eclipse."

The affection of this unhappy woman for

Borkman's son Erhart, and her struggles with his mother for possession of him, is one of the finest, most distinctive, and most pathetic touches in the play. But, like most of Ibsen's young men, Erhart is on fire with the determination to "live his life." His unhappy father suddenly conceives the illusionary but perfectly characteristic idea of handing down to Erhart the duty of "rehabilitating" (this is the difficult word *opreisning*, which caused Mr. Archer such dire vexation of soul in translating) the fallen fortunes of the house of Borkman. But Erhart is at this moment—again like others of Ibsen's young men—engaged in an amorous intrigue with a Mrs. Wilton, who on this occasion makes the inevitable Ibsenite "third." The son is, indeed, at the moment of the father's cry for the "rehabilitation" of his house, upon the point of eloping with Mrs. Wilton, who

is a *divorcée*, and hence he (Erhart) is very much disinclined to take any part in his felon-father's chimerical plans. And so it is that the shaken, spent, already dying Borkman fares forth into the snow, more than half-delirious though he is, to find his "unborn millions" of treasure and to gloat over them. The two women, fearful of harm coming to him at such a time of year and in such a place, follow him—the wife who has loved him in her own way, and the woman whose fate it is to love him for ever and always—until death and after. Here in the snow they find him. . . . He is babbling, inconsistently, feebly, fiercely, of the vast wealth for which he will dig and delve. Apostrophizing the "prisoned millions" that he has made his god to his own undoing, he cries—

"I love you, as you lie there spell-bound in the deeps and the darkness. I love you, unborn

treasures yearning for the light. I love you, with all your shining train of power and glory. I love you, love you, love you ! ”

The end is close at hand now, and that end is death in the snow-drifts. Like another Brand, but of base clay, he falls dead in the snow—dying not, however, in presence of the wife he has never loved, but tended by the woman who has loved him so surpassingly. Like Brand, he falls in the snow, but not under the avalanche of Will. If Brand be meet type of the Archangel, Borkman might almost as suitably sit for the portrait of the Arch-fiend. How typical is each !

The wife of Borkman is an interesting study of a not unusual type. We feel contempt for her when she so manifestly dreads the least word of the skeleton in the Borkman cupboard being breathed abroad—as if she did not know that the old story can never be forgotten, and that

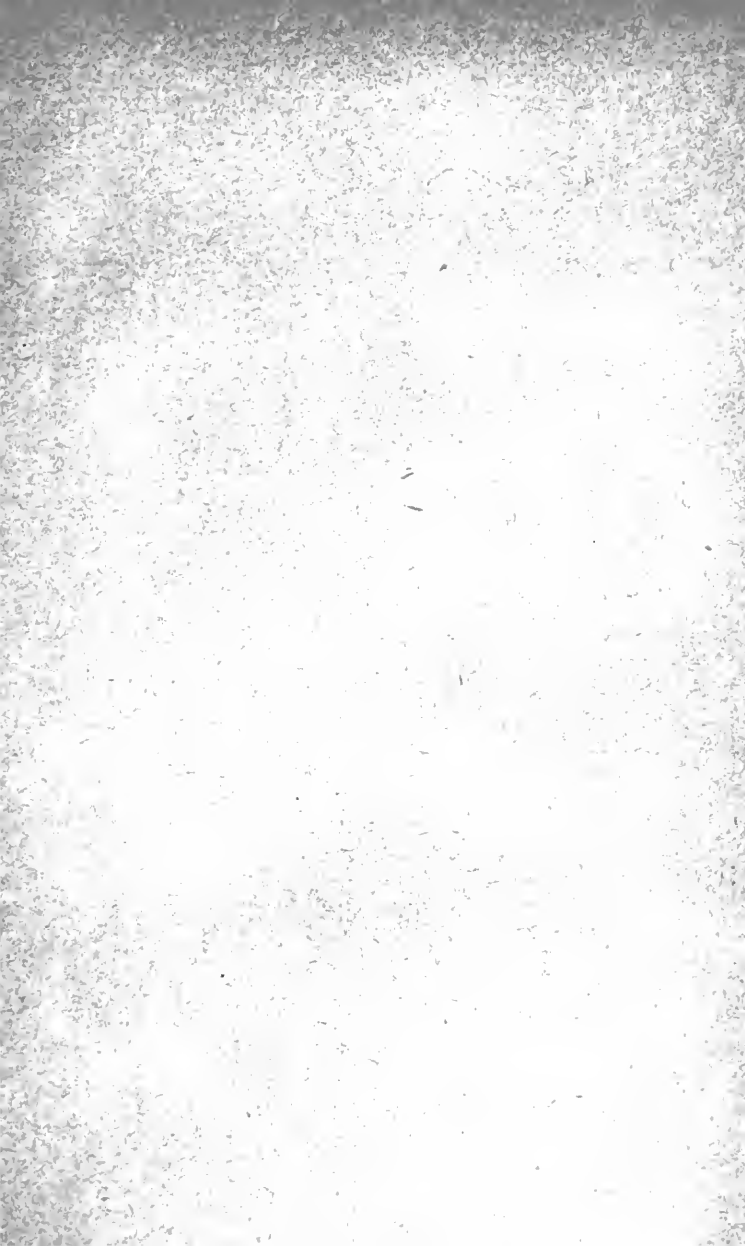
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their name is branded in sight of the world for evermore. Afterwards her distress, and the genuine human nature that Ibsen weaves into her character, are profoundly moving, and the comparison of these two women—each so “strong” or so “weak” in knowledge of the other’s feelings towards the criminal—is another of the most poignant features of this intensely moving, if morbid, play. How immeasurably fine, too, is the final five minutes, embracing the death in the snow and the spectacle of these two women, who have hated each other so intensely, clasping hands over the guilty corpse! In this we perceive, and perceive with the most pleasurable emotions, that the same influences which prompted the peaceful end of *Little Eyolf* are still at work in the poet-soul of the Norwegian master. A greater peace has somehow descended upon him since he gave to us *The Master-BUILDER*, and out of

storm has grown a sorrowing but less restless song.

John Gabriel Borkman, "couldn't live in the fresh air," as one of the characters in the play is made to express it. This, with the added explanation that he "was a miner's son," may be interpreted as symbolism. Such men as he cannot "live in fresh air." And by the time such men as he cease to exist upon this beautiful earth, we shall no longer have need of an Ibsen to exploit their virtues that are not.

P. C. S.







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